

The Uma, Little Flower of India Series.

Stories 1 - 15

Uma's



Tales

By Raymond Howell

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Uma

The Little Flower Of India

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theannstories.co.uk

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Author's Note

The Little Flower Of India.

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**T**he Uma Tales by R. Howell - were written several years earlier but revised in the early part of 2023 for the website, [theannstories.co.uk](http://theannstories.co.uk)

This version of Uma, Little Flower Of India contains all the tales about the life of a young Dalit girl growing up in modern India and was written at the urging of a Dalit who had escaped India's repression of his race.

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# Uma

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The tales of Uma, The Little Flower of India by Raymond Howell.

It is dedicated to all those Dalits who suffer under the Indian Caste regime.

May You All See Freedom soon.

Raymond Howell. April 25th, 2023.

The Dark Prequel

Preface

Uma - The Little Flower of India

Uma's tales evolve around her childhood so they are written simply to reflect that. Simple, yes, but they remain true to her story while embodying modern-day 'slavery' at its most appalling. The roots of which extend back some 5000 years and encompass every outrageous subversion and control which humanity kindly cares to inflict upon those they strive to dominate, using murder and violence - including the rape of children, some as young as two-years-old - as well as women, and arson, hatred, starvation, malicious lies, deceits, bribery and a mockery enjoyed at the highest levels of the Indian Government.

Disdain is the most pleasantest emotion Uma and her kind will ever receive from the Caste, her jailers. Fortunately, they stop short of the genocide of those non-caste Dalits, or The Untouchables as they are wickedly named, simply for what can be suspected as being the Caste's financial aspirations:- the loss of 300 million plus unpaid workers will bring that country's economy crashing down around them. And surprise surprise, the worst abuses seemingly correlate with those areas of their country suffering the outrage of the establishment's eco abuses. As the planet's suffering spirals out of control it would seem that the already downtrodden are being squashed even harder to finance the playthings of the elite and affluent.

Amid everything... Young Uma tries hard to smile and stay positive. No wonder they call her the little light, or sometimes, The Little Flower of India. But as big as her heart is, will she ever create a crack in the Caste wall wide enough for her people to escape through as she constantly dreams of doing? We'll just have to see... won't we?

If you would to read a little background on the Dalits and in particular

manual scavenging try these three links which will open in a new browser window.

[Explaining Manual Scavenging](#)

[Manual scavenging deaths of Dalits](#)

[March Against Manual Scavenging](#)

Sowing the Seeds 01

Introducing Uma

When moving forward in Uma's world, sometimes it's best to glance back to see who might be following behind and to understand why.

The town fifteen-year-old Uma, a young Dalit, walks through with bowed head as hewed from the dust and crust and lust of an ancient conflict. Where, much like Uma's birth, there was nothing peaceful about its arrival but unlike Uma it was not welcomed.

From amid a living turmoil of colours tainted by faeces, beliefs, needs and despicable wants, a monster society emerged with a tyrannical roar that was both oppressively silent and noisily tumultuous.

While the rest of the affluent and free world awakens to breakfast, or tucks into an evening of wine, feasting and song, or cricket junkies moan about that day's play, Uma's people in their part of the world partake of daily doses of murder, rape, torture, social genocide and death by disease and starvation.

The story of Uma, her Mama's little darling, her village's bright little light and to some, India's little flower, is set amongst the repression, degradation and violence committed against her race, known 5000 years ago as the Dassi and since 1947 as The Dalit, or now more commonly, the Untouchables, or as western journalists often refer to them, 'The Black Indians'. In short, they

are, India's unpaid slaves. Under India's Caste System, they are ranked lower even than Caste beggars and shockingly, some animals.

Uma's people seem to be called anything other than friends, countrymen, people of worth, people we want to know, or more properly, the indigenous peoples of India who were wickedly enslaved some 5000 years ago and controlled ever since by invisible choke chains pulled by a religion, which are never loosened. If anything today, in 2023 under President Modi they are being pulled even tighter. He even encourages the universities to expunge the Dalit's history from all courses. A history started with cities built 5000 years ago in the Indus Valley. They were the most advanced in the known world and so well designed and laid out and tended that they would better many cities today. And yes, unbelievably they had apartment blocks with running water, showers and a sewerage system and advanced irrigation. And roads with clear views so no citizen could ever be hurt by passing carts. Also, being a peaceful people they had no army. That fact, coupled with several natural climate disasters saw the invaders as they called them seizing their lands and enslaving the peoples. And it has been that way for them ever since.

These slaves are India's sordid evil secret, kept well hidden from tourists, WHO and other such organisations and the world's tabloids.

Stories or rumours or websites reporting the atrocious behaviour of India's Caste towards The Dalit are quickly killed just as efficiently as any Dalit who might try to stand against the Caste system of repression, enforced slavery and the total degradation of 350,000,000 Dalit people.

Such are the lies told to cover the crimes committed against the Dalit that only recently what was once known by WHO to number 350,000,000 Dalits was suddenly officially and ludicrously disavowed by India. "There are less than a million and we are working to bring those into our society." Or so lied a group of Indian spokespeople during a WHO meeting. One can only

surmise that they were referring to the number of Manual Scavengers whom previously India had denied ever existed, despite it having been proven that the spokespeople attending the WHO summit were between their collective households abusing 18 Dalit Manual Scavengers, those people forced to remove faeces by hand from public latrines and homes.

All those many thousands of websites which had once factually reported on the Dalit's situation have seemingly disappeared, replaced by sites allegedly sponsored by the state which conspire to hide the truth by painting a lovely picture of their life. However, that is not the reality. As they have also prevented the charities who arranged help for the Dalits from running their operations. It would seem that the Indian government has shut down all information about the Dalits other than for their own false messages.

Sowing The Seeds 02

This evil which dogs Uma's steps, this shameful dark secret of Indian culture, this sociological heroin, ferments away like the juice of an over-ripe mango left forgotten on the windowsill of humanity's back parlour. As this Mango-India shrivels and browns the rotting fruit releases toxic oppression, derogation, humiliation, incurable sickness, malnutrition, violence, torture, rape, sodomy, blindness, deafness and sometimes - in deed, quite a lot - for some, a welcomed death.

Masking the loud but muted cries of injustice which have come to inhabit this and all other towns across the land known as India, as well as the groans of the hungry, of the forsaken and those criminally and illy used, such as the Dalits, is the ever-broiling thrum of mad cap uncaring traffic. Complicating that concerto's flow are the discordant bursts of sharply squealing or screeching brakes and irate blasts of horns, the tinny rattles of over-ladened bikes and the hypnotic mellifluent competing chants of hawkers. To foreign visitors, it all amounts to a sensory overload but to the locals, it is simply another day.

Un-sensed by tourists are the bludgeoned cries of the enslaved and abused which meld with those other sharply animated and contesting shrill voices which in turn mix with the wavering cacophony of less significant dins that weave together to create this dust-blown sleepless hubbub of Indian metropolitan life. Behind almost every facade traces of slavery skulk like sinister shadows. But then this is the town where Dalits like Uma's Mama are forced to toil, for no pay, no respect, no gratitude, and no acknowledgement, except by way of beatings, rapes or starvation.

In this town of converging ear-aching globs of thunder-squalls, evil slips out to play. Unhindered some say. Others suggest yes to that and it is also encouraged. Whatever and however it is called, unfettered it roams through homes and along streets and in stores and more, chilling spirits, binding and blinding numbed minds and infecting unwary hearts.

For 50 centuries the evil that drove the invaders into this once gentle and peaceful continent has possessed the nation's looms and infected the threads used to weave the lines of rainbow-coloured saris, which on wash days flutter gently like flags of overseas nations fighting for a share of the breeze that is fanned by modern slavery. And where, off the backs of those poor souls, much business is done and vast profits accumulated. Without fear of retribution evil's blackness permeates everything it touches. Today, in 2022, the upper through to the lower Castes of India still welcome it. They feed the evil, caress it and sleep with it. Some even enjoy its sexually perverted caresses.

However, evil does not differentiate between its victim's backgrounds, it merely exists to corrupt and devour all compassion and caring and love - regardless of whose loins its plaything has sprung from. Today it destroys or controls everything and everyone within its grasp - even those who have yet to be born, as it has always done and if allowed, as it will always do. Where unbeknown to the Caste and their followers they are not, as they would want to believe, their own masters anymore. They too in their ignorance have become evil's mindless slaves or followers.

In this continent, evil is even found in those wonderful pungent spices whose aromatics linger in the warm air, smothering the odour of open sewers, tantalising the noses of the starving and the taste buds of the rich. While in the fields and within the factories evil slips into the food chain to become part of the nation's diet, before moving on into classrooms to blacken the tender shoots of innocent young hearts and minds, until they too are ready to march

forward to start the cycle all over again.

This evil bears a name - religion and its 350,000,000 victims are the enslaved Dalits, those poor people endowed with the delightful nickname of the untouchables. But beneath this dense blanket of diabolical evil, all of India Caste and un-caste suffer because that evil having no master will not be controlled or contained. Evil is as evil does and the Indians caught in its spell openly argue with tainted tongues and blind eyes and with hearing dulled by the hisses of false promises, "This is the only and the right way to live." While hiding behind their religion and sneering ignorantly they propose, "Why bother with the non-caste, they are not human - our religion says so, so therefore it's true."

Such is the appalling world which first heard Uma's outraged cries as collected tenderly by the passing breeze who, just like many Dalits, the indigenous peoples of India, do at such times, wondered - is this the voice of the one who will see things change?

Oh, let us pray that is so.

But that is enough for the moment, as Uma tells the Dalit's story far better than any other can, simply because she endures it daily.

The story starts properly in Born In A Toilet

Chapter One

Born In A Toilet

Setting The Scene

Uma's Humble Beginning.

Some tales begin with children setting off on adventures. Or lovers finding each other as they stroll along a golden beach, watching the sunset on a perfect day. Or a benign river spirit rests to admire the lands blooming in its path and to wonder where else it might flow and make things grow. But not this story.

Neither is it set in a palace and nor does it take part in a land of rolling hills and sweet-smelling meadows. Uma's world is as empty of such things as flies pooh most likely is. Her story starts in a Dalit village with little promise of a happy ending or even the prospects of a carefree day. But there again, this village is Uma's home and playground so that means anything can happen. Either good or bad.

Nine years on from Uma's awakening, as she calls the moment when at the age of six she received a violent baptism into the harsh and abusive life of a Dalit in India, there are still times when the memory tries to smother her hopeful outlook and wreath her tightly in despair. But not so much for herself. "What is done is done" she will say philosophically of such times, although at her age she has no idea what that long word might mean as her education and intelligence are not given but naturally gained. So in her way, recognising that some good came of her awakening, she might add, "and the good things might not have happened afterwards had I continued to attend

that school I once dreamt so much about.”

So Uma has learned to accept that good can come from bad if a heart knows how to seek it. It is an idea her Mama taught her and in the way of the wheel of life, she passes the same message on to the village children who call her teacher.

For one as young as Uma who at the tender age of seven started showing other Dalit children how to form their letters, it is an honoured and treasured accolade. Being proud of the mantle she means to teach her classes well and send the children home happy and enlightened.

“Being able to work around the poverty those Caste force on us and find some happiness and feel wanted...” the young teacher explains to the parents without a trace of conceit. “...and recognising our bond with each other and holding onto it during bad times can make our suffering more bearable.”

To the children, she might simply say, “This village is our home and we should be proud and glad we are a part of it.”

Such firm beliefs do not stop Uma from feeling momentarily sad whenever she watches a clutch of children gathering beneath the teaching tree to receive her lesson, or a story if she is so minded. She loves them all and it hurts when gaps appear in the rows where children once sat and to know they represent those taken from the village by sickness or Caste’s crimes.

“Bless them all,” she sighs as the children settle noisily. “They are so full of hopes and ideas, just like I was at their age,” she whispers into the flames of her small fire, which provides little warmth, just a touch of comfort in the dark of night where hormonal Caste boys so often prowl on the lookout for unguarded Dalit girls.

Privately, it cuts her badly knowing that the Dalit children's hopes for the future are destined to be dashed heartlessly and repeatedly against those imprisoning Caste's wall until their dreams are truly broken. It is my job, she accepts willingly, to teach these children how to keep their hearts strong, even when all hope has left.

Uma has learnt that some Dalits do rise above the Caste's prejudices to become Engineers, Teachers, and Doctors, but the spectre of their origins follows their lives. Only recently she heard a story about a cafe owner's treatment of an ageing Dalit Doctor. It saddened her because there was nothing she could do to put it right. He had been a valued customer for many years, but suddenly the cafe owner fixed him with a severe stare and asked, "What village do you come from... And are you Caste?"

Deciding the Doctor must be a Dalit because of his evasive answer the owner snatched the cup out of the Untouchable's hand and dashed it to the floor while screaming, "Get out! I will not have Dalits contaminating my cafe and clientele."

Humiliating as that was, Uma was aware that the cafe owner's reaction proved lucky for that Dalit. The doctor could have been beaten or set fire to in the street. Oh yes, she knows. Entering any cafe or store means walking on Caste pavements and that is severely punishable, not by law, but by religious belief that will see acts of disobedience severely punished. Alternatively, their home set to torch and their family chased away like vermin, or the hospital suddenly terminates the doctor's employment - "We've had complaints..."

Such are the fearful shadows that fall from the Caste's solid bigotry which the Dalits are forced to endure or dodge around every day.

And as light-footed and clever as she is, that still includes Uma.

Section Two

During Uma's dark soulless journey through the Petri dish of dangerous bigotry, that Caste town where she slaves like her Mama for no return, her happy memories cast a loving warm light around her guarded steps as she heads towards her place of servitude, a latrine. Like all days she is grateful for those joyful memories her beloved Mama made sure to add into her life right from the moment of her birth.

“Your birth was not an easy one,” Mama has revealed more than once in both tease and sadness.

“When the pains started telling me you were ready to come I was in that latrine where I work...” she says sorrowfully but also with love for Uma. “...I begged the Caste to let me leave for home to deliver you, but all they said was, ‘If you must give birth, do so quickly here, then get on with your work.’ So alone and squatting in the corner I gave birth to you in that dreadful place.”

Mama might also say while wiping a smudge of dirt from Uma’s face, or just for the joy of touching her, “Never forget that and know they might do the same thing to you when your time comes. Just think, I could so easily have lost you, my heart’s joy.” Then she might offer with a tear “...and maybe I did... because when I look at you I believe you are an angel sent by my darling husband in heaven to be here with me while he waits for the time when I join his side. You are so like him my love that I cry sometimes when I catch him hiding in your face and smiling out at me.”

Then she might laugh and tease, “But your face wasn’t so pretty then, my

child. Oh, No! It was all red and crinkled and nor was your voice so sweet. You my lamb bawled your crusty little head off.” She’ll offer with a smile while planting a kiss upon Uma’s forehead. “I was scared. I thought if you don’t quieten down the bad-tempered Caste might snatch you from me. And in you’re way my treasure you are still as noisy... but I love you dearly for it and I won’t have it any other way.”

The truth of that moment in the latrine which the passing wind scooped up and carried away to keep safe for Uma until she was old enough to understand, is that her skin was absorbing the scent and sense of her new surroundings - her inheritance - and in rebellious disgust she had bawled her blessed little heart out.

“But how could I scold you for that?” Mama will add. “I had been so hungry and sick that my milk had not come as it should, so all I had to offer my little birth-shocked baby was love. But my love was strong and I vowed then Uma that I will show you how to hold it safely in your heart to use for the good of yourself and as a gift for others. And let me tell you,” she might laugh “You clung to my love just as determinedly as the Caste’s disgusting pooh sticks to the latrine floor on a hot day.”

Then in the telling Mama might grow bitter as she recalls, “But even as I rocked you, men entered the latrine and just a mere step or two from you, my baby, they dropped their pants, straddled and crouched over one of the narrow channels to defecate. Some as they do, scolded or threatened me, saying it was not clean enough. Others delighted in flashing you and me their horrid thing. But why sully the night air further with such foul memories.”

Tiredly, Mama might also explain, “So all you got from me then Uma were those tears I shed for your future and my love for you. But those lessons that I freely and lovingly gifted you with since have served you well. And I wished then, as I do now, that if you do not sicken and if you continue to grow as I

pray you must, they will stop your wonders and hopes from turning into bitter dust. And maybe my love *you* will be the one to break away from this terrible life and in doing fill my heart and those who will follow you with so much joy.”

“Oh, I will break out Mama,” the younger Uma promises often. “I will.”

And it is a promise that Uma means to keep even as she walks through that dreadful town accompanied by the contemptuous stares and sneers of the Caste bigots, or while dodging the braver ones who step in her way to bully her. Yes, her controlled temper vows silently, I will tear this Caste wall down and I will break myself and all the other Dalits out of this awful prison.

Although she has yet to discover how to do that, she knows she will..., or she will die trying.

Chapter Two

Uma Makes A Vow

Section One

The years as years do changed, but not Mama's tiredness, her dry skin, or her lank hair and she was still painfully thin. Some weeks when struck by yet another illness she was merely a skeleton held together by sinews woven from her will and stitched to bones using her fear for Uma's future.

Once again as Mama set off from her place of slavery, the town's latrine, where daily without tools she clears human waste from the floor and carries it off through the town in an open weave basket balanced upon her unprotected head to dump it in the fields on the outskirts, she was waylaid by the Caste.

“You need to show us more respect...” a group of young Caste men suggested aggressively as she passed them by - which frightened her, as it always does. Partly for their fierceness and because they were young men and all Dalits live in hope that the young might finally recognise the evil of the elder Caste's ways and change.

But no, not this gang.

They surrounded and jostled her to taunt. “...When you pass us by woman, avert your eyes and pull up your rags - remember it's our right to see your calves witch and your duty to show them without being told.”

What else could she do, but obey?

Finally, reaching the outskirts of the town she began her long trek out to the marshes and on to home, her small lean-to-type shack built by her husband

using salvaged bits of this and that. For many beyond India, it would not be considered a home but for Mama it was. She has grown to love it dearly for it holds many memories of the family she once had and Uma who waits inside for her - that is, when she is not out playing amongst the shacks, or...

But Mama refused to dwell on the evil that stalks them. To do so is to invite it in.

Hugging her beloved Uma, she kept the encounter with the Caste bullies to herself. She could not bear to taint the innocence of one so young and bright and happy with such a horrible thing. Besides, it was nothing new. It happens often and has occurred to her kind for centuries.

Instead, mother and child sat outside the shack where under the night sky they shared a piece of stale flatbread someone had thrown at Mama's feet earlier that day as if they were tossing meat to a chained dog. To Mama, as always such 'rare gifts' turn to bitter dust upon her tongue. But regardless of how humiliating and contemptuous those acts are, she still picked it up. Food is food and my darling Uma must eat to build her strength to help her survive these horrid diseases I bring home every day.

As was her habit as she chewed, Mama's mind wandered into happier memories of her beloved husband and two children taken long before their time through, as manual scavengers call it, latrine sicknesses, where her thoughts then wandered to Uma's elder sister so cruelly used before she was killed by another sickness - Caste perversions.

She dreaded losing Uma, her last child to either of those evils. But as for the Caste's bullying, Uma will have to know about it one day, she reasoned sadly. She is a Dalit and as such it is a Dalit's curse, but not this night she won't. It's her fifth birthday and she deserves a better end to the day than that.

But how to pass on cheer for a birth when there is no money and a heart is so depressed for a child's future which promises to be bleak? But being Mama she would never suggest such things. Instead, as best as she could, she tried hard to bring cheer into the night and a smile upon her child's pretty, but hollow-cheeked face.

Section Two

Trying to be cheerful Mama could not help fretting and feeling inadequate as she watched her undernourished child slowly nibbling on her meagre ration, while carefully chewing every bit as Mama has taught her to do to work as much nourishment from it as possible and of course, so as not to finish it off too quickly.

“It is not true when some say the starving wolf down food,” Mama murmured, “they would only have to see you to know they are wrong.”

But she did not reveal all her thoughts. Those who are truly hungry learn to respect food like you do my child. What use is it laying as vomit on the ground? It is the rich who eat like pigs and who write about the poor they have created to suggest they eat like animals.

Mama was unschooled like many Dalits but she instinctively understood that such opinions are uttered by sociopaths to divert blame for their greed or crimes. It is also the way of Caste she teaches Uma in trickles to prepare her darling for the shocks of a life to come.

Besides, she has found it impossible to hide things from Uma. Whatever ails me, Mama thinks with a smile, this child will wheedle it out of me. Somehow, the little monkey knows my every mood and at times I think she even reads my mind.

Then a subtle smile joined Mama’s thoughts, But my Uma is no witch. Her heart is too kind. Too loving. Too inspired by her little world and too happy to want to cast evil spells around. She was just deciding that Uma was

naturally clever when the child cut into her thoughts.

“You’re gonna tell me what’s up with ya Mama,” Uma said pushily, but out of concern, before giggling, “cos you know Mama you always do...”

Maybe so. Mama agreed silently with another soft smile. But I have no wish to sully this night with such adult things. Standing up quickly, she murmured. “This hard bread needs water to soften it, Uma. There’s some in that cup inside, I’ll just fetch it.”

“But I already know the answer...” Uma revealed cheekily as Mama set the water down carefully between them to dunk their meagre portions of bread into it and hopefully not knock it over and break their only cup. “It’s them Caste again isn’t it.” Uma cleverly suggested. “What did they do to you this time Mama.”

Believing the truth was too unpleasant for Uma to know yet, there was nothing for it but to call on misdirection - it was time to tell Uma a tale she already knows to keep her mind busily wondering why she was being told it again.

“I was just thinking about your Grandma child,” Mama said. “The one you never met. It’s like I told you before, her body was still warm when the Caste stormed into our shelter to order me to take up her manual scavenging duties. That is one of my fears for you.” Mama said as she hugged Uma’s shoulders.

“I was barely twelve, but they did not care. I cried and begged for them to at least let me mourn my Mama and bury her first. But I was denied. Instead, they dragged me out crying and screaming all the way to the town’s latrine - the very one I still clean today Uma.” Then she grinned, “The very one you fell over in because you insisted on jumping between the gullies.”

That earned her a gentle slap to the arm and an embarrassed retort, “Don’t remind me of that Mama!”

Then Mama revealed a little more of the tale, a part she had never mentioned before. “You know, they made me work all through the night to clear away their piles and trails of shit which your poor Grandma could no longer do. And the next day as well, without rest” she said quietly. “You know Uma, I don’t think I’ve stopped since. And that’s why I am in a mood, I’m just simply tired of it all and I’m worried for you. What if I die in the night, what will happen to you!”

Uma glanced wide-eyed at her as she said “You won’t do that to me, Mama, I know you won’t.” Her words were not angry and neither was her stare. She was disgusted by the way her Mama was being treated and all the other Dalit villagers, especially the woman. She has witnessed many crying and others slowly dying - if not in body, in spirit. And she has seen the sparkle leave her older friend’s eyes when like Mama they are forced to obey the Caste. She has not told her mama this, but Caste boys come often into the village to taunt her and the other children, “Soon” they say mockingly, “it will be your turn.”

Unintentionally, Mama said bitterly before she could stop herself. “Those people Uma have no pity. They just take what they want when they want. Including the well we dug and built on our land so we villagers now have to beg to be allowed to draw water from *our* well. *Our* well!” She ended angrily.

With her deep brown eyes thrumming madly Uma declared as fiercely as a little fly-weight five-year-old ever could. “I’ll not let them do those things to me, Mama. I won’t! Only you matter to me Mama, I will not do what they want!”

“But if you refuse their demands and ways when your time comes Uma they will kill you for sure.”

“I will not be broken by them Mama” Uma asserted strongly. That both surprised and upset Mama. How can my Uma know such things? Only to be floored further. “And if they do kill me, Mama, I’ll be with you and Dada and my sisters and God in heaven and we’ll be free and happy, won’t we!”

Without any trace of doubt or fear. Uma then said “And they won’t be able to hurt you or me anymore, will they.” Which she ended by dropping her treasured piece of bread contemptuously onto the ground and treating herself and Mama to a spindly five-year-old child’s massive hug, which was all the more comforting because it stirred from the strong resolute heart of such a brave little one.

Section Three

As they clasped tightly neither cared to wonder 'What if God is on the Caste's side' - as those horrid people so often taunt while they steal from the Dalits and bully, maim, belittle, rape, burn and kill audaciously - without retribution or condemnation. In some very high circles such acts are even praised - and rarely if ever investigated.

Unbeknown to Mama, her clever little Uma with her litmus paper mind was soaking up the outrages that the wind in anger carries to this young child of the true people of India - those so cruelly used by the invaders for thousands of years. "You will be a herald of social change" the wind gently whispered as it caressed the child's face to cool her rising temper and dry her tear-moistened eyes.

Just like the manual scavengers of India, the wind is deeply sickened by all it touches. "But just in case you should be made to fail little one, or find the journey too difficult on your own," the wind explained in a whisper, "know that I am also tickling others awake. You will not be alone and neither will all those I encourage to go and seek change be Dalits. Others will join you little one, I promise."

Whether Uma felt the wind's parting, "Good luck little Flower Of India" may never be known. But there again her quietly whispered, "It'll come right for us Mama, I know it will" may prove more prophetic than her dear Mama could ever dare hope.

But there again...

The Caste's ways and systems have been finely honed and engrained over thousands of years. So how can one so small and slight ever take on and beat such evil might... She is just a little daisy struggling to break out of a world infested by nettles and thistles.

But there again, this is Uma... so maybe she can...

Maybe she will...

Flowers both seed and spread, don't they... Uma is fond of saying.

Especially into fertile grounds which inadvertently her Mama's efforts through her daily rounds of manual latrine cleaning are helping to produce.

Chapter Three

Uma's Dream



Section One

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**D**reams have roots don't they Mama," six-year-old Uma suddenly asked while they were out foraging for kindling one evening. "And one day Mama I'm gonna find the roots of my dreams and encourage them to grow into something good."

"And what dreams might they be my little light", Mama wondered with a trace of tiredness creeping into her sing-song voice. But it was not because of the bright child's prattling. Oh no! Never that! Uma was her living treasure and joy. She was simply tired of life as a manual scavenger working for an Indian society that treats her kind so cruelly while contemptuously calling her an untouchable. That particular word is the trigger which sparks her rebellious thoughts. If you did not force such horrid work on me and block access to our wells I would not be an untouchable. It is the Castes doing, yet they taunt me with it.

Complain as she might, it was not a new or rare outrage. She is just one of the millions of Dalits who are born into abject slavery to suffer and endure forever because India's ruling religion orders it to be so. Just as they order the Caste to 'let the un-caste (The Dalits) have water, but only if it has passed first through the belly of a cow'.

And that is her and Uma's life. Bending so the Caste figuratively and occasionally actually can urinate on them. But as angry as she gets she does nothing about it because she cannot. The Caste would kill her if she rebelled. And then there is little Uma to consider. Oh, how the Caste would dearly love to ruin her... If not through rape and then murder like they did her other

daughter, they'll force Uma to slave as I do.

The idea of Uma working in the latrines collecting up the Castes faeces as she does without tools, except for a tiny flicker she weaves from reeds, a little basket, and of course, her hands, appals her. And where is the proper clothing she often rants, or the healing medicines for us when we fall sick with their germs? Angry words that she sends silently into the wind when she picks her herbs down near the marsh before the sun arises. And what do they do when I fall ill just as they will do to my Uma? They make me work. And nor do they pay me, just as they won't her. They would rather we starve or die through sickness than give us their precious rupees. And to refuse their work is to be punished or killed. And my Uma is certainly rebellious enough to want to fight back, she worries... And she's bright too, which the Caste can't bear to see in a Dalit.

It was no wonder then that Mama was down. She was simply worn out, but I have to keep going she says, again silently, every morning as she drags her tired body to work. For who else will look after my darling little Uma...

Uma for her part was young but not blind. She could see that Mama's remorseless and thankless work was taking its toil, just as surely as the constant bacteria and germs were. Those very ones her Mama says had poisoned Uma's father and two of her siblings. And although she has never met them she can feel their loss, because it is there in her Mama's eyes every day. And to Uma's further dismay, Mama was growing old before her time.

Years of having endured the Caste's contempt was in Mama's stoop, her ever-present cough and the dulling of her eyes which had once shone and sparkled and made her husband swoon every time he beheld them, or so she told Uma with a smile - as well as in the furrowing of her brow and wasting of flesh.

“I have many dreams Mama” Uma declared brightly to cheer her up as she helped carry their meagre haul of kindling home to start the little fire to cook their scrap of rice which will be barely enough for one, let alone two. “But I dare not speak of my dreams aloud here Mama” she whispered. “Just in case the Caste hear and want to take them away from me - like they did my dearest sister...”

Mama did not miss the catch in Uma’s voice, how could she, for it was the same as her own whenever she speaks of her lost daughter. But as sad and as distressed as Uma was about it, she refused to be cowered by the Caste.

“.... One day Mama you will know my dreams. And I promise when they come true, you won’t be hungry, thirsty, sick, beaten, despised, or spat at again. Not ever my darling Mama. I promise.”

From the resolute way Uma squared her shoulders and marched ahead it was obvious to Mama that she had no intention of standing for the Caste’s nonsense. As she watched her daughter pause to cheekily hoot at an owl she was lost to know, do I cry for her future, as they will surely kill her if she stands up to them, or do I applaud her now for her ambition and nerve?

## Section Two

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One day, while talking with the village's wise woman, who many out of respect called Grandma, although she was barely fifty-eight years old, but that was considered to be a remarkable age in their village - eight-year-old Uma suggested, "When a pebble rolls by our feet Grandma we have four choices don't we? We can stop it. Kick it. Pick it up. Or simply leave the pebble to lie where it cares to rest."

"And which do you think would be the best choice?" Grandma asked while wondering where her favourite visitor might be heading with her question. Although she was not put out by Uma's unusual topic. Or by any of her many bright questions. Well... she might then smile before explaining, "That is until the child demands to know why some village men do certain things to themselves while they're in the toilet field."

The raising of that topic causes Grandma to shrug and send the child off on a sudden urgent mission. There will be another smile from Grandma as Uma rushes away to do her bidding that will say to any who might be close by and watching, 'That child has to know everything, even when it's not good for her'.

But that day, the question about the pebble seemed innocent enough, as was Grandma's reply which Uma answered easily.

"Oh, the last one, of course, Grandma" the child chuckled. "Because it will leave the pebble alone to be as it wants."

“But what if you tread on it with your bare feet child and it hurts you”, Grandma laughed. “I wonder, might you then kick it away in temper”

“Oh, No Grandma! I would never do that!” Uma replied firmly, but with her trademark smile which can light and lift the sternest of hearts. “I would remove it carefully from the path to spare the pebble and my friends any pain.”

“But in doing that child surely you *will* have changed its destiny.”

Unwilling to be caught up in one of Grandma’s clever traps Uma had her answer ready.

“You are right Grandma. But I believe the pebble will be waiting there for me to do just that. So it and I will be happy that I did. And I promise Grandma, I will make the change a good one.”

Although Uma failed to explain exactly what that change might be, Grandma let her alone, as she knew Uma’s heart and intentions for the Dalit. She simply smiled as she reasoned, the child has her dreams and her stories. She’ll give the pebble a grand adventure for sure or have it turn into something good for us villagers. “Won’t you Uma”, she whispered to the child’s back as she left for home, “and may our God bless you for that.”

Section Three

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**L**eft to themselves Uma's dreams, her heart-held secrets, continued to unfold largely unmolested.

As did her remarkable ability to understand all the creatures inhabiting her village and to whom she introduced herself or visited with regularly - whether they liked it or not. Her natural sense of community and caring grew as well. She was, as many villagers agreed, simply a beautiful little flower growing in this horrid dust bowl who has been sent to lighten our day.

Some might also say, “and to confuse us with her infernal questions”, but always with a smile, just as there were usually answers for Uma. But not about the men’s toilet field habits. But her persistent questions about that aimed at a certain guilty party did earn some chicken eggs. The bribe had started out as one egg - “You can have a fresh egg from my chickens if you go away and stop asking me about... you know.” The man in question said. But Uma sensed the secret was worth more than an egg so she plumped for six and happily settled for five.

The resourceful girl also managed to hatch three of the eggs - don’t ask... Please! Mama replies in shrieks of laughter whenever a neighbour wonders how the child ever managed such a thing. It is enough to say that Uma’s method kept her Mama smiling for ages. The other two eggs Mama and Uma shared. Oh, what a luxury that was. Mama concocted an omelette to which she added those special herbs she gathers each morning before the sun fully rises along with a little of the peppers she grows in a tiny plot of soil at the side of the hut to which she also added a smattering of rice. It was a feast

indeed.

As for those chickens which Uma hatched literally, and their chicks and their chicks - well... They are happily kicking up dust and chirping and escaping Uma's attempts to herd them together somewhere far off in another part of her story. Where no doubt she'll learn how to catch them. But for now one of Uma's special dreams is demanding attention.

## Section Four

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Almost from the very beginning it was obvious to Mama that her child was destined to be a teacher. She caught Uma at three years old laying down with a handful of worms she had dug out with her fingers from the edge of the marsh which encircled most of the village. She placed them on the dusty path in rows and was teaching her class the best way to wriggle. How could she not be a teacher, Mama smiled as she discreetly watched her child at work. Where there was never a crossword when one or other of the worms, as they do, attempted to go their own way.

Where in the way of such things teaching became one of Uma's dreams.

At six years old for one ecstatic glorious day wearing a brand new second-hand dress that was hardly marked, and her dead sister's underpants (slightly too large) she attended the town's school, only for her number one dream to collapse into a ghastly nightmare.

Devastated and physically broken for a long time, Uma continued to learn her letters and read in her village. Nothing would stop her from doing that. She read everything which came her way - discarded newspapers Mama fetched from the open latrines she laboured in, through to labels on old cans and packets. "Everything is knowledge" Uma explained to her Mama. "And I intend to learn all those things the Caste don't want me to. And I promise Mama I will learn them well, so I can help you and the other villagers."

Section Five

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**B**y the time Uma turned nine she was teaching the village children about the creatures in their village and beyond, and also how to read and write.

One evening, shortly after the tall grass had been cut down at the edge of the village and from around the toileting field, which in happy shrieks and grass fights the children had gathered to be used as fodder for the village's only goat, Uma called the children together for their lesson beneath the beautiful teaching tree. And it was, despite the area's impoverished poor soil and the villager's constant need for firewood, as well being surrounded on three sides by rancid marsh, it not only managed to survive but it had grow tall and strong.

Just like we Dalits will do one day, Uma vowed as she watched the sun tint the sky with wonderful dusty shades of apricot, pinks and yellows before slinking away, as if in shame for having presided over yet another hungry, exhausting and terrible day for many of the Dalit villagers.

"Well children, clearing the grass was a job well done," Uma said as they gathered together. "You should be proud of yourselves."

"But you helped as well," one of the children reminded her.

"Yes I did," Uma agreed with her customary smile, "and it pleased me to do that for us. By cutting back the long grass you have prevented the Caste boys in the next village from using it as cover to creep up and spy on us as they do."

And that makes me very happy.”

What she did not need to explain, or care to, was that it will make it harder for the Caste to secretly pick out their next victim to drag off for a beating, or worse. It also meant she felt free to speak her mind without the risk of the Caste overhearing and rushing into the village and beating her for it.

As the day’s light finally turned grey and small fires sparked up to glow like tiny bright blessings in the coming darkness, some of the Dalit parents settled in to listen to Uma teach their children, but on this evening, feeling happy that there was no threat of being overheard by the sneaky Caste boys Uma declared. “I’ve decided there will be no lesson this night my friends. I thought instead you might care to hear about one of my dreams.”

Not a single dissenting voice was heard, which caused Uma’s wonderful smile to sparkle even more than her Mama’s was doing in pride for her daughter.

## Section Six

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"Lift your eyes to your God children and make a wish." Uma gently encouraged those who sat in a semi-circle before her.

While Uma waited patiently for the children as they raised their eyes skyward to send their heart's wishes to their God some of the parents watching close by smiled. The girl's the same age as many of those sat before her and yet she is so much older in attitude - even older than some of the parents here, a few thought spitefully.

When the children's eyes returned to gaze upon her once more Uma asked kindly, "Are you done, my friends?" Where they each added a smile to their nodded yes, while lightly placing hands upon hearts to show they had stored their wishes there as she has taught them to do.

"Good," she chirped brightly while lighting the night up with her genuinely warm smile. "You don't want to lose your wish now, do you? So keep it safely locked away, because it belongs to you and no other. And now my friends, I wonder, are you ready to hear my wish..., or should I say, my special dream."

"Yes! Yes! Yes!", they chorused happily, almost together in one joyously sweet, but slightly ragged a-cappella moment, while their parents nodded along. They have heard many of Uma's stories and she weaves good ones, but this promised to be even better, because it was one of Uma's secret dreams, and her Mama always said that Uma's dreams were big and strong. The parents just as eager as the children to hear the dream settled quickly as

Uma said quietly and breathily, “OK then, if you’re already, we’ll begin.”

Out of the enwrapping hush, for even the teaching tree had stopped rustling and the little fires close by had settled into gentle respectful glows, as did the glimmering stars above them, her soft lilting voice grew and rose. Before her first sentence was even completed her sweet harmonies were flowing through the air like a magic carpet, lifting the audience’s souls and carrying them off to the world of her dream.

And it was to prove a big dream too.

Section Seven

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"In my dream I was wandering through those hills we see growing in the far distance when I stumbled across a special jewel." Uma stated, her gentle voice was so full of wonder and enchanting that the children happily fell under her spell.

"My heart instantly knew it was the largest and most purist gem of its kind."

"Oh my", she sighed. "How that jewel sparkled so gloriously with a magic light that lived in its heart. Then suddenly in my dream, I find myself inside a big palace kneeling before the Indian President and I'm holding the jewel out in my hands. When I raised it towards him the light falling through the windows struck the gem. Causing a rich tapestry of colours to burst from the jewel and dance through the air to play upon the walls and glisten upon the faces and in the hearts of those who had gathered in witness.

I was happy. I wanted those who witnessed it to be awed by the jewel's beauty. I wanted their hearts to be enthralled by its presence. And they were children, believe me. Hundreds were gathered but they hardly made a sound, even their covetous breaths were stilled as I said to the president. "Sir this is for you."

With a secret smile, I watched as a host of emotions flooded his greedy wicked face. He was yearning to own my unique once-in-a-lifetime jewel. But truthfully, it was hard to tell which shone the brightest, my jewel or the greedy possessive light flaring in his piggy eyes.

And even now as I reveal my dream to you I can see his pudgy bejewelled hand twitching excitedly as he reached out to snatch it from little me - yes children, the little me he says is nothing but a lowly Dalit fit only to be ridiculed, robbed and enslaved at his will - just like the other 350 million of our Dalit family are.

“But hold on Sir! Not yet!” I say sternly and bravely in my dream as I sharply pull my hands away from his. “Firstly, there is a ceremony of giving to be performed.”

In his eager excitement, yellow drawl dribbles sickeningly from his fat overfed mouth as I place the jewel on the ground before my rag-covered knees. Then I pull out a glistening blade and that horrid mouth drops open as his eyes bulge in sheer shock and terror. He had suddenly realised the knife was a magic one, but before he can finish shrieking “STOP HER... STOP HER!” I have cut a large slice out of the gem and in doing, destroyed its value and the purity of its beauty forever.

Oh, how he gnashed and screamed in rage, but before his soldiers could drag me away I rose and explained my purpose loudly for all to hear.

“Sir...” I said as I pointed accusingly at him, "...this jewel represents all that India presently is. With my blessings, you may have it, but first I took care to remove the heart of the stone, the heart of my nation. And I shall name the missing piece, The Dalit after my people. Those your kind - the invaders - unjustly enslaved thousands of years ago and wickedly still do. So, Sir here is my gift and long may you enjoy the incompleteness and the corruption of all that was once beautiful before your ancestors ruthlessly destroyed it.

I then lamented loudly as I placed my hand on my heart - my dream's font.

“Oh, India, my India my heart and home, you have been truly shamed.”

Then I say to those gathered in the palace. “May you all feel as robbed and as denied and as empty as my kind do.”

Then returning my eyes to the president I say, “And my words Sir are the real gift which I send from my heart for you to keep and to remember for your eternity.”

Uma’s eyes caught by the light of her tiny fire’s glowing embers suddenly seemingly flashed an angry red as she looked down at the children. Already enthralled and heartened by Uma’s telling, gasps rippled along the rows to disappear into an awed silence which in their imaginations could only be freed by Uma’s magic knife.

She was not one to disappoint them.

Into the hushed stillness, Uma coldly for one always so kind and loving and sweet looked up at the stars and declared. “And may his next life be as cruel to him as the one he gifts to us over and over again, every single wicked day.”

# Chapter Four

## Uma Meets Sita

# Section One

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The dusty multicoloured town of faded grandeur was awake long before the sun, which was only beginning to stretch awake as fifteen-year-old Uma walked along the edge of the artery road with her usual careful gait.

Wary of the traffic she stayed close to the pavement, but far enough away from the Caste to stop them from accusing her of contaminating them while also staying out of range of a swift slap or a crafty kick from an errant foot as they swanker along their sacred path with much less careful tread than her.

It was Uma's right to walk along that pavement, a right that no Caste would ever grant - a right which has seen Dalits lynched, burnt or suddenly disappear simply for daring to test it.

Look at them all, Uma tuts, but inwardly. They strut and screech like monkeys fighting to keep their place on the top branch without caring that it is too weak to bear their weight. Without us more solid sensible Dalits supporting their aspirations they would never survive. Oh, wake up you silly fool her eyes flashed contemptuously as a man stepped out to cross her path, only to jump back and curse when he spotted her. It is you who contaminate me, not me you, she yearned to scold, but dare not.

Silently cursing, what right have you to steal my voice she reclaimed her errant shawl from the fingers of the playful breeze, the very one which at her birth had cooled her flushed face while whispering, "Will you be the one to lead these people to freedom?" Now, seemingly those same invisible fingers were trying to pry the shawl away, maybe to reveal to the Caste, "Here,

walking before you is the true meaning of beauty.”

Gathering the shawl and pulling it lower to shield her intelligent eyes from the offensive sight of assumed privileged and to re-establish a sense of security, be it ever so flimsy, her thoughts returned to the little village class she had held for the children the night before. One event had shaken her badly, but for the sake of the children, she had not shown it. They deserved to be spared her new knowledge for a little while longer she decided without once realising that in many societies she would be thought a child herself. Neither does she dwell for long consciously on the reality that she is off to clear a public latrine of its deposits - without protection or tools, other than her strong grit and those supplied by nature - her bare hands because as a non-caste the Caste dictate she has no right to use tools. However, subconsciously she is seething, not just for her plight but for those other children she is desperate to protect from such a future.

But as for last night’s discovery, although she has heard stories relayed fourth, fifth, and sixth-hand even, she now has first-hand knowledge which is always better she explains to the children than relying on that old tricker rumour which is so often wrong and misleading. Yes, she muses, the Caste are not the only ones to bully, or in this case, trick a Dalit into manual scavenging.

To her dismay, Dalit men to save their homes and themselves from starvation will marry to gain a wife to sacrifice to the Caste’s demands. As much as she understands the reason, it is still appalling to know that her own people are as cold and as cunning as the Caste.

Section Two

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**T**he previous night before she started the lesson Uma was chatting with some parents whose girls were coming close to the age where they could be forced to take up manual scavenging by the Caste.

It was difficult time for the parents. None of them liked the idea of their daughters following in their footsteps, and some had never told their children what work they do. Which exasperated Uma.

“I would not wish such work on anybody.” Uma asserted, “But to fight a monster we need to know how to exploit its weaknesses, that way we can protect ourselves better.”

Then quietly and without her customary sparkles and giggles she explained.

“I know it’s upsetting, but they need to understand why when they leave our village they are spat on, bullied and beaten, along with those many other hideous abuses that await them... many sexual.” She added with a hardening heart. “But being 7 or 8 or 9 years old does not mean they are safe. If anything, they are more vulnerable to those Caste boys who stalk us.”

Just as I was at their age, she thinks but does not say. But then everyone in the village is aware of the beating she endured and the breaking of her heart when she realised Caste bigotry had made it impossible for her to ever attend her beloved school.

As the children settled in an arc before her Uma spotted from the corner of

her eye a young lady sitting all alone and off to one side, although she was closely watching the other woman and Uma.

She's a couple of years older than me, Uma guessed, and if her pink and purple sari is anything to go by, she's new here. No one dresses like that in this village. We cannot afford to for one.

But as well dressed as the lady seemed, on closer inspection and just like many of the other villagers, her hair was bedraggled and she had the air of a tired and disillusioned manual scavenger.

As Uma's soft but heart-lifting sing-song voice floated upon the still night air before falling into respectful silence to politely await the children's questions, the young lady was seen to scowl and shift uncomfortably. Now and then she even bristled and Uma was keen to find out why. Although, she had her ideas about the woman she as always preferred facts to silly rumours or unfounded conjectures.

## Section Three

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Although the subjects Uma covered were occasionally gloomy her lessons were delivered lightly. Learning should be fun not torture she believes, but they are Dalits and the girls may go on to become scavengers so there are things they need to know. Such as hygiene.

Through the newspapers, Mama has fetched over the years from the latrine Uma has come to understand a little about the spread of bacteria. Her number one rule for safe living is to wash before handling food, or touching your children, or your family and wash your clothes as often as you can. “So many of our children” she urges “die because of the germs we pick up from manual scavenging. We must do what we can to prevent such things.”

That night her comment caused the lady to snort contemptuously and then unable to contain herself any longer she rose and stormed over to Uma to rail aggressively. “What’s all this nonsense about looking for good as I heard you say earlier and how can I prevent illness when I have to pick up Mala with my bare hands? Tell me that Miss know all,” she demanded.

Instead of being insulted, Uma simply smiled, which infuriated the lady further, only for her volatile mood to be stirred into the apoplectic when Uma said sweetly, “Then let me suggest you don’t use your hands. And don’t scowl so either. You look like the Caste when you do that... and we don’t want their contamination here in our village, now do we?”

Despite her mood, the woman had to smile and then at Uma’s bidding, she sat sulkily down beside her.

“Now just look at these,” Uma said as the woman settled. Unwrapping a bundle laid at her feet Uma revealed a collection of home-made implements that she uses as examples for the little class of Dalit children. “Choose any one of these to help you. And my name is Uma by the way.”

Only to laugh when the young lady eagerly dived in and picked out a scoop and a flicker to test their strength. “See, we Dalits must stick together and help each other. Right?”

Section Four

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**T**he scoop was one of many Uma had woven from the reeds which grew in the marsh along the edge of their village. "My workmanship is not brilliant," Uma said as she demonstrated one, "and as you see, they are more like slim paddles than the scoops some women make from willow, but they will save you from using your fingers. Then when they wear out you'll find it fairly easy to make a new one.

While the woman examined the tools Uma explained, "I would love to use willow as well, but whenever we collect any the Caste come and steal it. So I use reeds which grow in the marsh and are easily gathered."

Suddenly changing tact Uma shrewdly suggested, "But that's enough about reeds, something is telling me you need to talk, right?" Where with a smile and a nod she sent the children off to play. "But before you say anything, let me explain. The good I talk about" Uma chuckled when the children's happy shrieks started filling the air, "is that by doing this work you have come to meet me, and I you. So now we are two. And yes, you may borrow that scoop and flicker..." she laughed when the woman sneakily put the tools behind her back. "...but it would be better if you let me teach you how to make them for yourself. And a name is always nice when talking to another... isn't it?" Uma prodded with a smile.

"Ah... I'm sorry... Yes, I'm Sita" she blurted, embarrassed. "In all this stress, I forgot my manners. I've been conned and it's too much to accept."

"Conned?" Uma asked, with growing concern as she picked up on the

woman's distress.

“Yes! Conned!” She shouted, aiming her words in the direction of her shack. “By my new so-called husband, that oaf in there!” She said angrily, “He made my family believe he was a caretaker or an agent for 100 houses and needed a good wife to help run things. But what do I find when I get here? Not the fine house of a manager or an agent as I believed, but this dump...” she said bitterly while indicating the Dalit village. “...And...” She grumbled. “He just wanted me as a replacement for his previous wife who had manually scavenged a 100 houses. A 100!” She exclaimed horrified. Then fighting to hold back tears and her temper she snapped, “Where I come from we do not trick each other like that. And nor we do such horrible things to survive!” Then she whispered sadly, “And how can I leave him now, you know I will be disgraced if I do, so I’m stuck here with him and this scavenging.”

Uma was horrified. But as awful as his lies were, she also understood the reason for his trickery. If he could not replace his wife he would be beaten by Caste, or his shack set on fire, or they will chase him from the village - or worse. He was desperate and who would ever willingly take on this life? He had to trick her to survive. And the fact that she understood his reasons horrified Uma all the more. The poor woman, she thought, where for once she had no nice words to offer. Indeed she found it hard to say anything other than a perfunctory, “I gathered something like that from your fine dress.”

It was offered softly, with a gracious smile as she rubbed the material admiringly. “It’s good quality,” Uma said and that simple act calmed Sita. The last thing she had wanted to hear from a girl who was younger than herself was insincere platitudes.

“So, if you’re staying with us then we need to show you how best to cope, don’t we?” Uma suggested practically, which won Sita over and in that way, they were introduced and Uma chatted in her light cheery way while showing

her new friend how to prepare fresh reeds for drying.

## Section Five

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Much of what we do and how we live is because of the Caste's bad attitudes." Uma explained as they wove the reeds.

"They say their gods demand non-caste to be treated like animals, but I do not believe a good god would ask such a thing of anybody, including the Caste. And as for cleaning their toilets for a living that is not the humiliation, is it Sita? All toilets need cleaning, it is the how and why we do what we do which causes such offence. Can you see that Sita? You would clean your toilet if you had one and maybe your neighbours too if they were ill. Wouldn't you?"

Reluctantly Sita nodded yes, she would.

"As we all would", Uma agreed. Then her heart began to beat harder as her thoughts collected into a speech and a little flush touched her cheeks as she stated. "But certainly not using our bare hands, or because we fear the thrash of a rod against our backs, or that they will evict us from our homes and throw us off our land. The Caste's way is a sick madness."

Her face then flushed a deeper red and her eyes flashed dangerously as even hotter words punched the air. "Is my blood not the same as theirs, and my skin, my hair, my eyes? Lend me your posh sari Sita and let me wander amongst those silly people and they would not know I was a Dalit. All this nonsense is in their heads and hearts. I say they have lost all reasoning. They shrink from us in daylight yet they don't fear our contamination when they rape or beat us, do they? Or force us to clean for them. One day Sita" Uma

declared strongly, “I plan to reveal their nonsense so they can see it clearly for themselves.”

“But you’ll show them how?” Sita asked disbelievingly. “There is so little of you. They will easily crush you.”

Uma’s sweet unexpected laughter sent her hot words off into the wind before she grinned and said calmly. “Ah... I see you are still innocent of your true self Sita. Understand they can beat a body black and blue but a good heart will always stay true. I am a true Dalit. I will not be cowered or corrupted by them. I will find a way to fight back.”

Sita nodded along but it was clear she was not fully at one with Uma’s words, or her heart.

Section Six

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**Y**ou are not alone in thinking that way Sita." Uma acknowledged. "But if you stay here was us you will learn different," Uma explained as her deft fingers wrapped a piece of reed around the end of a fresh bunch to hold it together which she skilfully wove into a knot.

Only to laugh kindly at Sita's puckered face as she tried to make her fingers copy Uma's quick movements. But Uma guessed there was more behind Sita's expression than the difficulty of tying reed bunches. She'll declare her heart to me soon enough, Uma decided with a knowing smile as they settled together quietly to get on with the business of stringing reeds into bunches to be dried. As they laid the last one down Sita shyly turned to Uma and asked, "OK... Tell me... What did you mean by, I am innocent of my true self?"

"You and I and all the Dalit villagers here as well as across India are raised to believe we are humble, unworthy, untouchable, cursed if you like. But tell me this Sita," Uma asked as she clasped her friend's hands while looking deeply into her eyes, "Are you humble, unworthy and cursed?"

When Sita hesitated, Uma said rebelliously. "No, you are not! You are human, you have a soul and I believe you care for others. You are worthy and you are certainly not cursed. But you have yet to feel that and that is why you are innocent of your true self."

"But..." Sita protested, "I am poor, I am Dalit, I cannot change my life. I have no value besides working to keep my husband and his brothers fed."

“Ah. Sita,” Uma said, “You do have value to me and a place here with us. And I hope you will become my good friend,” Uma suggested kindly. “And I pray that one day you will be blessed with healthy children, and in turn, they will give you worth and you will be valued by them. But above all, you have a splendid lineage, a proud history that dates back much further than the Castes does. You are a Dalit, and that is something to be very proud of. You do not need to feel humble.”

Then wearing her teacher’s hat Uma paused to let her words sink in. Where shortly she was rewarded with the dawning of Sita’s smile, where almost against her new friend’s will the corners of her mouth lifted higher as the shackles of her oppressed self were loosened.

Uma smiled back. “Welcome to Uma’s world” she laughed. “And God, the Father, welcomes you too. I am Christian,” she announced matter-of-factly. “And my God, the only God as far as I’m concerned, will never humble you. A true God would not do that to anyone. But other gods do and that is what we are fighting against. But be proud of who you are Sita, for I am as proud of you as I am for myself and for all the villagers here and elsewhere.”

## Section Seven

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"**Y**ou talk about fighting a lot you know," Sita suddenly said. "And it confuses and scares me. I've only just met you and already I feel as if you're going to be taken from me by the Caste. How can you fight them? You are so thin and small and kind" she added with a smile. "How can you truly believe you can beat the likes of the Caste?"

Uma laughed loudly as she replied. "Thin? I prefer delicate" she teased. "And I do not fight them alone silly, I have the strength the Father gives me and you're sitting here beside me so that makes us two. I believe it is no accident that you are here. You have a purpose and together we shall discover it. And when I call the children to order they will sit here with us too, as will their parent's spirits, and the hearts and spirits of many others. So you see, Sita, I am not alone."

"But still you are so few," Sita ventured, "while the Caste is strong and many."

"Does not an ant carry 100 times its own weight? And a flea jump 3,000 times its height while tiny birds easily fly around the world? I may be small Sita and my army few but our will is strong and that makes us many. But you doubt me, don't you?" She asked when Sita's brow furrowed as she tried to understand Uma's way of thinking.

"I do, a little," she confessed.

"I know," Uma agreed while shifting closer to Sita to deliver her killing blow

- this part of the telling as she calls it she always enjoys.

“The Caste envies our hearts and strong will. And because they can never truly own them they try to beat such things out of us. But they will never succeed of course. It is foolish of them to even try. There are millions of us Dalits in India with strong hearts who will not be beaten. We will fight back using words and ideas and our visions of free will and love will scare the Caste into awareness so one day they will see the evil of their brainwashing of both us and yes” she emphasised, “of themselves. When they do, we will not need to fight. They will simply turn inwards and fight amongst themselves. And while they do that, we Dalits will escape through the cracks that will appear in the Caste’s terrible wall.”

“Do you honestly believe that?” Sita wondered, only to grin as she realised that Uma had just chased away her temper and replaced it with a sense of pride and hope.

"Oh, yes, I do. And Sita, so will you in time. Especially after you hear more of my story.

Chapter Five

Uma Discovers Fear



Section One

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**B**efore Uma reached the giddy age of five and go on to grow and eventually tell the children her dream, at four she started to explore the village as she had so wanted to do at three, but hadn't because she couldn't quite find the courage to venture so far from their shack without Mama at her side. But when she did start to follow her heart, Uma's life blossomed into one fantastic happy blur of experiences.

There were so many wondrous new things to keep track of that she simply had to discover their names and how to keep a count of them. How disappointing would it be to brag, "I've just spotted 5 birds, Mama", or worms, or rats only for Mama to say with a smile, "But we saw 10 dear." So, determined to get such important matters right she started to learn her numbers as well as tell the time so she can avoid being late for tea with Mr Rat. Only to find out that Mr Rat was indeed, a Mrs Dormouse. So, in the way of a bright highly imaginative four-year-old, she earnestly declared, "I have to know all the creature's names Mama and how to spell them right for when I send out my invites to tea. It will be rude to get their names wrong, won't it Mama."

So, in the way of rain falling on dry soil, she soaked up every single bit of new knowledge and discovery quicker than a jackdaw can hop, or a snake hiss, "Get off my tail girl!"

So for Uma at four, the village turned into a magical playground, as well as becoming her teacher and from early morning through to night the air echoed with her joyous laughter. Where her zest for life spread through the village

like a contagion, causing smiles to bloom on the saddest of faces as old thrills long forgotten were recalled and revisited, as if seen through her young bright eager eyes that had yet to be tainted by Caste shadows.

No one in the least minded her excited shrieks or those full-throated happy cries that flew from the little firefly as she dashed hither-dither like an excited, but benign, whirlwind around her personal amusement park, chasing this or exploring that.

When she was not running, her nubby but eager fingers would lift every rock. Or her excited eyes scour nooks and probe deep into mysterious shadowy crannies. Often, her lips parted in wondrous OOO's and gasps as she investigated things living in the scraggly grasses and yes, she came face to face with snakes, which she bravely scolded for daring to scare her. She even ventured down to the dreaded marsh on her own where strange mystical creatures are said to lurk. But to her disappointment, she never found any, but that only made her more determined to be acquainted with everything else that inhabited her domain, including the beautiful wildflowers which sadly visited so briefly.

When she wasn't exploring, the child with wide-spread arms and happy giggles turned into a kite and allowed her spirit to be caught by the breeze. Or she might morph into a bird or a butterfly, a bee even, but never a tree. They tended to stand far too still for her lively imagination to bear for long. Or in moments of rest she might sit and in rapture listen to the elder's tales. Many were outrageous lies or wild exaggerations told teasingly to see how wide and round her eyes might grow, but she loved them all the same and splendidly they added to her growing awareness and knowledge.

She was as happy as any child could be. A naked one, most times true, but then so many of the youngsters in that village were. No one gave it a thought or an unwanted look. It was simply what it was. Just innocent poor children,

surviving in harsh conditions that were made even worse once the Caste arrived and set up camp just down the lane.

That was when the village's water well was annexed and the Dalit girls and younger women began to suffer badly... and when the breeze, the very one that had celebrated her birth, encouraged Uma's fledgling sense of Caste wrongs to stir awake.

## Section Two

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Once the sun had forsaken the day and passed the sky over to night to adorn in a velvet coat, it was the turn of the cycling stars to fascinate Uma's imagination. Laying upon her back she loved to knit shapes out of the bright sparkles while dreaming of visiting each and every one of them. And yes, on foot!

During her non-stop rambles and adventures she begged books, scraps of articles, anything she could read, even the labels on old rusty tins. Virtually unaided she went on to teach herself her numbers and letters until at four and a half she was proudly able to write forty-four of them in the dust and she understood the life cycles of all the creatures that inhabited her youthful world. Despite her full and lively vocabulary, which she cast freely about in her gentle eager sing-song way, the one word she enjoyed and used the most was the very short, “Why...?” And she asked it of everybody, about everything, all the time.

Such was their love for this bright little jewel, that those villagers lucky enough to be blessed by her enthusiasm instead of running away from it, or shaking irritated fists at her cheerful persistence, took time to slake her thirst. Like a desert after rain, Uma obligingly soaked up every drop of knowledge they cared to trickle her way, where like the desert flowers do, she grew and blossomed.

Of course, certain adult things and matters were kept away from her busy ears which occasioned Uma, who missed little, to ask some awkward questions. That included the exact way her beloved elder sister, her co-

conspirator in many adventures, had been abused by the Caste before they placed a rope around the “the Dalit whore’s” slender neck and strung from a tree - tauntingly just a little way up from the village.

“It was a Dalit revenge killing” the Caste had happily informed the police - “They’re a bad lot them - we’ve heard the whore’s Father did it.”

Except he had died some years before... But his death did not stop the authorities from accepting the excuse.

“Oh well... I guess we’ll mark the investigation as closed then. What does it matter, she was only a Dalit and she probably raped herself anyway and then in shame committed suicide.” And so that is what the coroner wrote in his report and about many other similar killings across the area too. He was not alone in that abuse. It was a common contagion found throughout India’s establishment.

Modi, the Indian President, thought it all highly amusing when the Dalits complained about their treatment.

“Just what do they expect us to do about it, I don’t know” Modi had laughed at a rally. Then to much applause, he joked, “But blame us they will.”

But Mama did blame him rightly and the officials for doing nothing to stop such crimes. She felt if anything their attitudes were driving the outrages. Where subconsciously Uma who heard or felt it all absorbed her Mama’s often silent anger, her heartache and confused, what have I ever done to these Caste to be treated so unjustly? Aren’t I, aren’t we all people, just like they are? So why do they treat us worse than animals?

Section Three

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**F**or a short while, somewhere in the middle of the period where Uma freely boasted, 'I'm five now', her gushing sprays of "Why's" were aimed at a more exotic, but equally obliging audience.

During the morning on one particularly messy monsoon day, Uma peered out of the tiny misted window in their small shack fretting about the wildflower seedlings she had planted a few days earlier. "But Mama I have to save them," she argued earnestly, "I have to bring them inside."

"And where will you put them, child," Mama replied tiredly, she was still soaking wet from the long walk home and hungry. "Our shack is far too small for so many seedlings and we have nothing to put them in child."

"But, they can have my bed roll," Uma pleaded. "They'll drown out there Mama if we don't."

When Mama failed to agree she complained, "But they... will..." only suddenly for her eyes to open wide in surprise and her words to quickly trail away into a gasp, followed by a rare moment of utter silence. Surprised, staggered even, by the sudden lull in Uma's constant chattering Mama wondered, "What in the name of all things have you just seen my girl...?"

"Strangers are walking about outside Mama," Uma shrieked as only an excited five-year-old can, "and they are so wet the rain has washed away their colour Mama. Look, Look! It's turned them all white, Mama. Look! They've gone white!"

It took a moment for Mama to realise what Uma was trying to explain, only then to laugh freely as she put aside her tiredness to join her daughter at the window. “Oh my,” she uttered mysteriously, “they meant it!”

“Meant what mama, who who” Uma bubbled excitedly.

“I met those people in the town yesterday Uma and they said they might call in on us one night and well...”, she said in utter astonishment, “...Here they are. And look at me I’m such a mess too! And you without your clothes on!”

Rushing to their makeshift door Uma pulled the covering aside to get a better view where in seconds in her excitement she yelled as if her Mama was in the next village and not a few strides away. “Mama! Mama! They need our umbrella Mama! Can I give it to them Mama? Can I... Can I?”

Now there was a question.

The umbrella was their only treasured luxury, but Mama could see what it meant to Uma to lend it out so reluctantly she nodded, yes alright. Not that it will do them any good in this weather, she thought.

But Uma was already hatching a plan.

## Section Four

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Whoever the people were they needed rescuing and what else did Uma have to do on this dismal no-play day?

Unselfishly, and with no regard for her nakedness, but that was simply because she never thought about it, Uma grabbed the umbrella from her Mama's hand. Wearing a smile as bright as a sunny day and as wide as the Indian ocean she rushed out into the thick heavy monsoon to present the broolly.

Mama's visitors and soon to be Uma's new living breathing encyclopaedias were a small group of ill-prepared photographers, who had come to witness the life of a manual scavenger and a Dalit settlement. Unfortunately, their arrival coincided with the worst conditions that an Indian monsoon has to offer.

As the photographers looked about at the damage being caused to the village they knew sadly, year on year such conditions will only get worse as the cruel and unavoidable effects of climate change set in to permanently turn the villager's dry soil into an uninhabitable swamp while casting out the inhabitants, like litter, to be taken up by the ever-increasing storms - created from the bowels of the wealthy and the aspiring. Yet another act of abuse committed against some of the poorest people on the planet, one of the photographers murmured as Uma approached. But little smiling Uma had yet to learn about any of that.

As for the broolly, instead of shielding them, as Uma hoped it might, the gift

added more waters into the monsoon's outpouring - though they were not a product of the darkening clouds, nor were the new waters borne upon the strong winds - they welled steadily from within. The unselfishness of the bright little girl won the photographer's hearts over.

A few moments later happily steaming and dripping inside Uma's packed and cramped tiny home they settled in to answer days of her cheerful and unrelenting Whys?

She learnt so much about lands overseas and the oceans that her little head spun with ideas and even more questions which they gladly answered. All except for one, although they truly wished they could. It was a question she asked one evening after a group of extremely irate and hostile young Castes from the next village stormed uninvited into Uma's shack.

They were angry that their slaves rather than the Caste were receiving attention from overseas visitors and how dare the Dalits do that!

Section Five

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**H**ow the Caste heard about the visiting photographers no one would ever know. But there they were brimming with violence and demanding to know why they were there. Only then to threaten Mama, ranting that any photographs taken would be used to mock the Dalits and her family. They even ordered the photographers to leave. Uma was too young and loving to understand the ignorance of discrimination, but she recognised anger and boiled because she believed they were attacking her new friends.

Horrified, she rushed over to stand protectively before the photographers where the tiny 3-foot 3-inch unclothed stick of dynamite exploded. Her shrill voice cut through the noisy monsoon as if it were merely the gentle pitter-patter of light summer rain. “Leave my friends alone!” She screamed. “They’ve done nothing to you. Nothing!”

Her new friends were astonished by her bravery, while Mama was mortified but proud. As for the bullies, they just sneered contemptuously and laughed at her nakedness. Perversely other less desirable thoughts touched one or two which they stored away along with the thought, she’s pretty... and one day...

One man hissed threateningly, “We do as we please see, you silly little slave, so try and stop us!” while jabbing Uma hard in her tiny chest.

The word slave was yet to be a trigger for Uma’s contempt and temper but something in his tone, his anger, or his nasty glint worried her enough to spin her head until she found herself poking a suppressed memory. Where its eye suddenly popped open as a warning growl sounded.

Uma's dark, round, fearful eyes, suddenly filled with vengeful fire and angry tears.

## Section Six

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Too young yet to be truly frightened by the man and the danger he posed, she was scared by her helplessness as well as confused by it. But even then her kind spirit was trying to break out, but all she managed was a whiny, half-wailed, "Please leave them alone..., please."

The ringleader's face contorted with rage. How dare she speak. Menacingly he curled his fist into a tight ball and stepped towards her. Suddenly the rush of fear as it burst wide awake inside Uma shook her hard. She stepped back terrified, but there was nowhere to go. All she could do was gulp and gasp as he pulled his arm back to give this slave a belt that will knock her head off, maybe even snap her puny little neck. Just as he thought, if it doesn't the next one will, another emotion, a much stronger sense of outrage knocked her fear aside and encouraged her to duck.

The sudden movement jolted her subconscious awake to open a door into her consciousness. Where, as if flying in upon the wings of the monsoon winds her dead sister's voice suddenly screeched accusingly inside her head. "It was him who killed me!"

Uma reeled but not backwards, this time she bravely stared back. "It was you!" she gasped when a blurry image of a man dragging her struggling sister into a car arose like a spectre from the swamp in her mind's eye. Where she shivered angrily as the vision sharpened causing her to gasp again when she realised she was watching her younger self rushing towards this very man screaming, "Give my sister back, gimme my sister back."

For the first time in three years, Uma recalled the moment of her sister's kidnapping and how she tried to stop it and the frightening words the monster spat back as he slapped her face hard, knocking poor Uma to the ground before kicking her savagely in the head. "You're going to stop me? I don't think so, slave. And one day It'll be back for you, little pretty."

In her mind's video, she heard her sister's screams as he drove her away. But now the monster was back and Uma was petrified but she refused to cower. He had killed her sister and she was going to tell on him. Raising her trembling hand she pointed and screamed. "He's the one who killed Sis. He killed Sis. It was him Mama... it was him. I seed im take her, I did. I seed it, Mama, I seed him."

Instantly a flurry of angry arms and feet and threats and curses filled the tiny space. The bullies lashed out with fists as large as her little head, sending Uma and her Mama spinning and flying. Shocked beyond their pacifism the photographers leapt forward to shield the 'ladies'. "You'll have to go through us first" two of them hissed while the third photographer merrily clicked away with her camera capturing their ignorance, hopefully for all the world to see.

The rapist and killer rallied his cronies and off they fled. As dizzily as a winged sycamore seed caught in a strong gusting wind Uma chased after them, screaming, "You killed my Sis, you did, you did. I seed ya. I seed ya"

(Sadly, the pictures were never allowed to appear in the Indian press.)

Section Seven

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**H**urling threats and abuse at Uma the gang leapt into their car and sped off, leaving her to stagger and fall into one of the many fastly widening puddles that had appeared all over the village. The lashing rain stung her skin like a viciously wielded Caste's belt as she wallowed in the puddle nursing a sore cheek, while the storm's off-key singing did its best to drown out her simpered, "I did seed ya, I did. I seed ya..."

It may well be true, but no one in authority or of Caste will care to believe the lying little Dalit, or so the thugs laughed, "We're safe from her."

The photographers sorely wished they had videoed the moment, but it was over too quickly. "And if only we could have captured the child's courage."

Outraged, they were all for reporting the attack but Mama begged them not to. "I have lost too many children already, and I will not give up my Uma to be murdered by the Caste, for they will surely do that. If you do report this be prepared to come back and dig our graves. This is the not civilised West you know," she admonished. "But thank you for your concern."

Fearing they were in great trouble Mama said to Uma while drying her off. "We may have to flee from here my brave one." Before explaining fearfully to the photographers. "Loose ends are dangerous things to leave around in a Dalit village. But then again" she shrugged while reasoning as the bullies had just done, "We are Dalit, so who will ever believe us."

Then turning back to Uma she whispered. "To me, my little precious you are

a princess amongst princesses and I believe you, but to those monsters, that nameless evil which stalks us, you are a five-year-old Dalit of no worth.”

Then addressing the photographers again she poured out her fears. “Even if you did report it, they will whisper poison to the police who are their friends and relatives. Just as they always do,” She explained angrily. “And kill any chance of an investigation.” Then with exhaustion filling her eyes and pinching her cheeks further while weakening her legs, she said, “Welcome my new friends to a Dalits world. You wanted a story, well now you have one. Use it well, but do not include our names.”

Astonished, but full of understanding the photographers consigned Uma’s bravery and her Mama’s fears to their hearts. The memory of their time with Uma and Mama went on to encourage them to expose tyranny wherever they found it skulking or murdering around the world.

So, it would seem that already Uma, this bright little spark, her Mama’s little light, or as she was later to be called by a special friend, his little flower of India, was bringing about change - just not for herself... Not yet.

But she was working on it.

## Section Eight

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A few days later after the photographers left the rains finally slowed. Which was just as well, for much of the village was underwater. Thankfully, it never quite made its way through Uma's doorway, although it did form huge puddles just outside.

Months on when Uma wondered why they were not flooded out like most others in the village, Mama recalled how Uma had stood up to the bullies and teased her. “Oh, that’s an easy one to answer child of mine. The water daren’t come in here because you’re far too fierce for it to face.”

The photographer’s visit did light one little candle, which began to glow brightly in Uma’s shadow-filled shack.

It happened during what should have been a private conversation between the photographers and Mama. But as Uma years later explained with a chuckle to her new friend Sita, “I was hiding under our wonky table so I had to listen, didn’t I.” She laughed.

“And tell me this, Sita” Uma said, “how was I to learn anything if I didn’t listen!” She grinned. “Anyway, I heard them say, ‘Your kid is really bright and it would be a waste if she were not able to go to school’. I tell you, my heart beat so excitedly when I saw Mama nodding to show she agreed. It was all I ever wanted to do, Sita. Go to school and learn. Only for my excitement to drop a little when Mama said, ‘Money will be the issue’. But it quickly picked up again when she added. ‘But... we’ll just have to see what can be done’. Then I nearly yelled and gave myself away when the photographers

said. 'Don't worry, we'll help you when you need it. Just write to us at this address...'

Section Nine

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**E**ager to know more, Sita asked. "But those Caste men you talked about, they did leave you alone, didn't they? Because you're here talking to me, right."

"Yes they did... and no they didn't" Uma riddled annoyingly.

She's teasing me again, Sita thought with a grin. Just like she did last night! But I'll get her back! She grinned again as Uma took a breath before continuing with her story.

"Despite Mama's fears their contempt for us Dalits worked in our favour. They knew we would not be believed so nothing happened... Then..." Only to sigh and stare into the fires fading embers which encouraged Sita to wonder, is she going to finish this tale off or not...

Just as she decided no, she isn't, Uma looked up and said. "I must admit Sita, I felt fear for the very first time. Learning about their hatred of us Dalits in that way was a tough lesson", she said quietly, while attempting to poke life into their little fire although the glowing embers did little to warm their spirits or ease the shivers which ran through them every now and then.

"It was a lesson I will never forget, although at the time I did not understand it. But shortly I would." She added quietly. Then her musical laughter broke the lowering spell as she teased. "But it's late now, Sita, so maybe I'll tell you all about that another evening after I've finished teaching the children their letters and have found the courage to revisit that dreadful moment. All

I'll tell you, for now, is that it changed my life, although I have yet to decide whether it was for good or bad. For one thing, I might never have met you, Sita" Uma said with a growing smile. Which grew even wider when to Sita's exasperation she riddled, "Or there again, I might just have met you sooner..."

# Chapter Six

## Uma's Awakening

# Section One

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Shortly after Uma's sixth birthday Mama held the door of their shack aside knowing full well that the glad news she harboured was going to send her little light blazing around the village in bursts of extreme joy.

Smiling and hardly able to contain herself Mama announced, “I have some good news for you, and guess what my little light,” she goaded teasingly. “You won’t have to do any chores to hear it!”

At such a wondrous offer Uma was suddenly all ears and an excited explosion of “What is it, what is it,” and bubbly-faced and uncontrollable fidgeting limbs. Mama chuckled as a pair of bright eager twin headlights stared into hers while her child’s animated lips squealed, “Tell me Mama, Tell me Mama what it is...”

“In a couple of days you are going to sch...”

That is all she needed to say. As Mama predicted, Uma erupted into a wild explosion of leaps and foot-stamping happy shrieks which powered her rapid flight out of the door.

“... ool” her Mama finished with a laugh as her little joy careered loudly along the dirt track to disappear amongst the other shacks where her happy yells and cheers were heard and felt across the village, where many hearts swelled with gladness at the news. Unbeknown to Uma those who smiled the most had clubbed together to add to a donation Mama had received from the photographers to help send her there. How could a child that bright be denied

her schooling?

This collaboration between villagers was a rare thing. Not because they hated each other, far from it. These people strove to survive together daily, but it is hard to share when you have nothing and are starving yourself.

But Uma wasn't called the little light for anything - her natural gift was to make people smile and bring them together.

Chapter Two

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Uma's awakening was to come a little while later but before the seedling, Mama's little light was to have the affectionate nickname of the little flower of India bestowed upon her. For she had yet to meet Sami, the person who was to gift her with that name and to influence her life from then on.

Before her awakening as Uma was to call the event which in its cruel way changed her life, she was a happy, beautiful wide eye delicately slender but carefree child of six. One who was just about to start school.

School!

She was finally going to attend that esteemed place of learning she has dreamt about even before she knew exactly what a school was.

As far back as three-years-old Uma started acting like a teacher. She was a natural, as the worms in the soft soil at the edge of the marsh where she lived might testify if they were able to speak. To her annoyance that was one little trick she never managed to teach them. But as for wriggling... well...

And as for going to school, she went about the village full of pride and was utterly bursting with hopes for a great future. One she imagined packed with exciting life-enriching knowledge which she intended to use to help the village and her Mama. Her first day was approaching although far too slowly for her liking. Each day since she learnt she was to attend school she had worried as the dawn peeked out at the world, "Is it today I start school

Mama? Is it?"

Mama would laugh back... "So help me do child you have more waiting to do yet."

"But Mama I want to go to school, I do ..."

"I know you do, but you can't go there wearing just your birth suit child of mine. And help us do you need ribbons for your hair and maybe a pair of sandals to protect your feet. That school is a long walk away." She explained while brushing her daughter's long silky black hair. Which she followed up teasingly with, "Instead of ribbons maybe I should cut this mane of yours short. It'll stop you from getting little crawly things in it."

"Oh No, Mama! Not my hair!", Uma pleaded as Mama expected.

"Then stop nagging me, child. I'll tell you when it's time to go. And remember we still need to find you a suitable dress. And where are we going to find the money for all those things I wonder."

"We will Mama I know we will, we have to Mama," Uma said in her hopeful way, which Mama was also expecting from her child. After all, this is her Uma who sees only good and hope in all things.

"Well, then child while I'm away at work talk nicely to God and ask him to gift you with some patience and provide some help for me. And you never know you just might manage to ease my ears and make it to school"

## Section Three

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A few days later, wearing a bright pink borrowed dress, scrubbed almost raw and with hair brushed until it shone, Uma left the shack.

She was wearing new underwear too though they were a bit big. Plenty of room for you to grow into them little sis her big sister had laughed when she gave them to Uma as a birthday gift. That was the day before her sister was callously kidnapped, raped and then strung up in a tree to hang so all could witness the shame of her ruination; where even in death her belittlement continued when she became another uninvestigated upper caste outrage.

Uma knew her Mama was angry with the authorities though she never understood why her sister's death meant so little to them. She treasured her sister's memory and until this day she had refused to wear the gift for fear of ruining them, but she so wanted her sister to be with her on her first day at school so she put them on.

Waving goodbye to her friends who came to cheer her off Uma started her long trek into town. Such was her excitement that it raced ahead to settle into a classroom where it waited impatiently for her to catch up.

Even in her eagerness, she was still nearly late.

Uma for the first time ever was allowed to wander unaccompanied up the lane that led out from her village, which in hindsight came close to being a huge mistake.

Her Mama had to leave for work before the sun rose and she did not want Uma hanging around her smelly dirty latrines. “But I want you with me for my first day” Uma had protested. “Please come with me, Mama.”

“That would mean you coming to work with me first..” Mama reminded her. “...and it wasn’t that long ago when you came with me and against my wishes you naughtily insisted on jumping across the low dividers running between the channels of pooh and pee and what did you do child of mine? You slipped in and ruined your only clothes. And we never heard the last of that did we!” Mama laughed. “and Heaven forbid child that should happen to you again on your first day of school! No, it’s best all around if you go on your own.”

What Mama did not tell her, because she sincerely hoped it would never happen was that arriving early and waiting outside school is known by experienced Dalits as the beating time. Her little Uma was not going to suffer that torment - not if she could help it.

Section four

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**S**o on her glorious first school day Uma walked the three miles alone.

She started quickly enough but was soon enthralled by all the new sights, plants and different types of birds, strange crops and all manner of wonderful things which rushed out to welcome her excited eyes and mind. Obliging she greeted each one with happy short skips, long dawdles and occasional pirouettes. Finally, eventually and only just in time she and her euphoria reached her dream destination. Where she stood before the building in awe of the many tall white windows and long steps that led up to the door. Bounding excitedly up them, two at a time, she paused at the top to catch her breath and wish herself luck and to thank her Mama and promise God she will make her Mama and the villagers proud.

Then she dashed through the doors and along a short hall into 1a, her classroom. Her shoeless dainty little feet hardly made a sound but her hurried happy pants were clearly audible as she burst through the doorway with a face flushed with excitement. The teacher without asking her name or giving her a second glance sternly pointed to a desk situated to the far side of the classroom and well away from the other students while uttering tersely, “Dalit, sit over there at the back.”

The row was designated the Untouchables area where she was to be alone. To someone older and wiser that may well have raised worrying alarm bells - where were the other Dalits? But Uma not knowing any better took it all in her stride. She was a child about to sit with other children in her new

classroom and to her nothing was amiss. All she saw was her dream unfolding before her.

Respectfully she nodded her understanding to the hook-nosed, tall spindly stern-faced teacher while noting his white short-sleeved shirt, his tie, pressed grey trousers and open brown sandals as she slipped behind her very own desk to sit down on her very own chair. Not wishing to make any noise to disturb this wonderful place of learning she carefully manipulated the chair until she was able to comfortably rest her elbows on the desk and settle in to receive new knowledge.

To the teacher and her classmates had they cared to look her way she might have appeared absent-minded or dreamy as her wonder-filled eyes roamed freely across the walls. With a smile that said one of my pictures will be up on the wall soon she noted the children's drawings, their hand-written decorated essays, and an array of huge colourful maps, pictures of important looking fat men and every tack and every blessed sticky fingerprint so she could describe it all to her Mama later. Nothing escaped her scrutiny.

At any point during the day had they asked her to close her eyes and recite what she had seen she would have easily and happily recalled it all perfectly. With the walls exhausted she turned her attention to the piles of books, the other children's backs, the blackboard, and the teacher's desk, adorned with a wicked-looking cane placed prominently in a stand on top. She swallowed fearfully at that while promising herself she would not get acquainted with it. Moving rapidly on she inspected every single piece of classroom paraphernalia where her heart swelled with pride, I'm part of all this. Oh what a wonderful day and thank you, God, she silently sighed.

## Section Five

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Unknown to Uma it was customary for new children to stand up and introduce themselves to the rest of the class, the usual drill dreaded by children the world over - the red-faced, my name is... I come from... and later I will go too... speech followed by a very embarrassed and quick sit down.

Being a Dalit Uma was not called upon to explain herself. In some ways, it was as well she didn't. For certain she would have chatted away for hours.

One girl a little younger than Uma turned around and smiled sweetly from behind her book and Uma smiled back shyly, before chuckling softly as she caught the new exercise book, her very first, which the teacher threw in front of her. Missing the dirty look he gave her along with it, Uma pulled out from her pocket the little pencil stub her Mama had given her for luck. With head bent in concentration and full of joy for the task ahead she proudly proclaimed on the cover, 'This book belongs to Uma'.

The remainder of the day passed in a whirl of enchantment. Regularly her little eager hand shot up as the teacher asked the class questions, but she was not picked once. He did not even bother to look her way. Nether-the-less she still enjoyed every second of every minute.

For her, the time flew by only too quickly. School was just as she always imagined it would be and she could hardly wait for tomorrow.

Like all the other children when the end-of-day bell sounded, she rushed out into the bright sunlight but unlike her classmates, she bubbled excitedly. She

was also ravenous. The tiny little tear of old bread she ate at lunchtime had hardly fuelled her whirling mind. Schoolwork she discovered is wonderful, but it does not fill a hungry tummy.

Revelling in the feel of the breeze she spun happily around like a humming top letting it lick her face and legs. A little giddily she then waved a happy goodbye to the school building before dashing off to take the road that will eventually lead her home.

Suddenly from nowhere, a gang of teenage boys emerged from the shadows at the exact moment the teacher strode hurriedly by. With a nod and a smirk he acknowledged the gang who grinned in reply, where they then surrounded Uma and without warning one of the youths punched Uma hard in her startled face. That was the start of Uma's beating, the moment when her dreams were changed forever, or her awakening as she came to call that dreadful event.

Section Six

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**T**ogether the four louts jostled and kicked her to the ground where laughing they maliciously set about illustrating the physical horror of hate crimes.

Instinctively, Uma curled into a ball only for its safety to be denied. Two boys grabbed her arms and legs roughly pinned her down while a third stripped her. Yes, her borrowed dress and her sister's pants were victoriously thrown into the air along with the words, "Animals don't need clothing". The breeze caught them up where like the ghost of her dreams they landed a little way ahead, close yet far enough to be out of reach.

With three of the Caste louts holding her down a fourth bolder lad with uncaring fingers and a very perverse mind invaded her where she should never be touched, not at her age, or ever on any occasion in such a vicious manner. As she screamed and struggled her hand broke free only to be stamped on hard, while another spat in her face.

Behind the gang a cluster of schoolchildren gathered to cheer the thugs on and egging them into a frenzy. although they hardly needed any encouragement. Dragged off the floor Uma was shaken violently and slapped down repeatedly as if she were a piece of dough while feet lashed out indiscriminately. Each kick was accompanied by profanities she had never heard and certainly didn't understand.

But there was one comment she would always remember.

“You Dalit bitch, you f\*\*\*ing whore, you piece of garbage, you sh\*t licker!”  
Each vile word punctuated with a kick or a punch or a gob of spit.

Terrified she screamed by they were smothered by the crowd’s cheers and her attacker’s horrible curses. Through her groans she heard every single nasty curse and cheer. When particularly hard kick lifted and turned her on her side she raised her teary, swollen fear suffused eyes up at them where pleadingly her trembling mouth formed the one simple emotion-packed word that she once loved so much because of the knowledge it brought her, but now all it held was pain. “Why” she cried, “Why?”

Her answer was a fist slamming into her mouth and the words “Shut the f\*\*k up slave.”

Her lips split and immediately puffed up, swelling worse than a badly performed lip enhancement. She had her answer, so it hardly needed the added sneer. “Because you’re Dalit, you’re an Untouchable.” While another boy screamed as he kicked her. “You’re cursed! Keep away from us and don’t pollute our school ever again! And don’t ever talk back to a Caste, ever!”

Then laughing “Teacher will be happy”, they slouched off.

A few steps on the perverse thug turned back to her - his loins were screaming, you have unfinished business.

## Section Seven

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Through the hazy slits of swollen eyes Uma saw him pick up her underwear, where for a beat, she read compassion in the action but then, to the amusement of the watching children, he loudly emptied the contents of his nose into them before contemptuously tossing the soiled garment at her head.

Swaggering over he slammed his foot down hard on her ankle where using his full weight he ground it into the road like it was a cigarette he had finished with. The piteous but infuriated screams that heartless act ripped from her sore lungs inflamed his blood. On a high, he kicked her savagely again. Where his foot catching her chin flipped her over, sending her sprawling on her back and her thin legs flaying helplessly open.

His lust exploded.

He wanted to have her right there in front of the crowd only for his friends to call, urging him to run. Disappointed he spat. "I'll get you next time, that's a promise Dalit" before running off, although there was no need for haste. Being young he had yet to learn that he was able to go as far as he pleased in his mission to humiliate Dalits and anyone of authority would be looking the other way.

As the boy fled the crowd thinned but a number remained to enjoy the spectacle of a Dalit withering in pain. Some even laughed and pointed gleefully at her grotesquely swollen, profusely bleeding face and ridiculed, "See, you don't even look human!"

Not a part of her body was spared pain. Even the soles of her feet were raw from where they had dragged her around to get in better kicks. The smallest but greatest wound was in that special place. Petrified, she stared uncomprehendingly down at the blood beading in that region and began to shake. With hostile faces to one side and thundering vehicles on the other, her shaking turned violent while a cold dread crept into her heart. A choke escaped her lips as she watched her blood slowly dripping onto the dusty road. The choke was followed by another and then another until they formed into a long wail which rose in pitch as she began to scream her blessed heart out. "Help me please someone... help me..."

Her plea was met with laughter which rose in various delighted howls when her thin wails called out for her Mama. The wind in furious concern rushed over where carefully it picked up her screams, but by the time Mama was located carrying waste out from a house several roads over Uma's voice was so stretched all Mama heard were the fractious noises of traffic and the rise and falls of the town's heartbeat. Struggling to sit up in the road, Uma was the loneliest, the most desperate and confused she has ever been. She simply could not understand why no one wanted to help her.

"I would help them, I would God," she simpered. "So why won't they help me? Why...?"

Section Eight

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In that heartbeat the word 'Why' shed all its sparkly charm as it bashed aimlessly around her head like a fly trapped behind glass - its journey futile and pointless. As for her God, he seemed to have abandoned her to the Caste.

She tried standing but immediately keeled over but no one cared to help her. No one. Contemptuously they just stared at her with cold eyes and hearts full of hate. She is a Dalit, she is untouchable, she is cursed, let her bleed, let her rot, let her die where the bi\*ch lies.

Suddenly she caught the eyes of the girl who had smiled at her in class, but now having been re-educated by the crowd's hysteria the child simply stared at Uma with contorted face. Hatred had made hers nearly as ugly as Uma's but at least Uma had an excuse. "Help me" Uma mouthed awkwardly through her swollen lips. "Please."

"As if!" The girl sneered back, "Stay in the gutter Dalit. That is where your kind belongs."

My Kind?

My Kind?

Like a dud missile, those words bounced off a mind refusing to comprehend their meaning, so they failed to hurt, but she was glad the girl strutted away. She didn't want to see her, or any of those people ever again. Uma bore the

girls parting jibes of, “Your Mama’s a smelly latrine cleaner and so are you”, with the natural stoic fortitude of peoples born into unjust servitude, but who hold strongly to their race memories of a splendid past.

A past that many say was morally and spiritually superior to the race who were currently ruling India.

## Section Nine

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Inch by painful inch Uma dragged her bare body through the dry dirt to reclaim her clothes. She reached her soiled underwear first, her sister's last gift to her.

The boy's insult to her sister's memory tore Uma apart more than the beating ever had. Desolate, with a shattered heart, with bowed head and clutching her underwear tightly Uma sat in the road and sobbed her heart out. The tears cascaded down her face and she left them to drip off her chin to form little puddles in the dry dust.

She so desperately wanted to curl up and hug her knees but she was hurting too much to move.

But she had to.

Her sobs grow louder, more distressed and tortured as she stretched out her crushed hand and with throbbing aching fingers slowly pulled her dress towards her.

Struggling through the pain she managed to grip the material enough to hold it against her chest. Another wave of tears fell as she used it to cover her new shame. That was another bitter lesson she learnt that day.

Slowly, she began the painful chaos of dressing. It was excruciating. Pain and humiliation crippled her movements. Her overburdened heart crumpled like a dry leaf when finally this beaten girl accepted there was never going to be

any help, not for Dalits. Not for me she decided as she turned her head away - why look at people like that, they don't deserve to know me.

Even then Uma refused to take the word hate into her heart but slowly, regardless it edged its way in any way. In that moment our little torn, abused, but not crushed flower took her first step toward being a fully-fledged Dalit, an Untouchable, by learning humility, dignity and what it was like to be hated and scourged, by millions for absolutely no earthly reason other than an ignorant and fearful hatred of the Dalits historical and proud bloodline.

One Dalit wit once suggested, "Those higher castes tremble in fear of our bloodline because the new rulers are incapable of living up to it. That is why they beat us, they are angered by their inferiority."

Even amid her pain and struggles, Uma was forming those ideas for herself, though hers were expressed to suit her young mind better.

Stunned and bewildered, with her little body screaming in agony, she dragged herself up and dizzily staggered towards home. As she struggled on, her mind was a whirl of confusion, but one clear thought made its way through. They snatched away my dream and didn't like me because I enjoyed school while they didn't and I could answer all the questions when they couldn't.

It was just the merest spark, but already our beautiful big-hearted bright little light was trying to shine again. Her faltering steps might have been weak and difficult but her spirit was rallying enough to encourage her heart to vow, one day I will defeat these Caste, I will...

But for now, with the tatters of her pink dress flapping in the breeze and her underwear clutched in a tight ball, Uma in dragging hurtful stumbling steps, alone and very broken, began the long painful three-mile, half crawl, half shuffled nightmare trek out to her village.

As valiant as her efforts were, she was not to make it.

Section Ten

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A mile out from the town wracked by unbearable pain Uma dropped exhausted by the roadside where momentarily, giddily and confused she swayed and rocked like a devout Buddhist monk praying fervently for her Mama - begging her to come. Finally, she collapsed unconscious as severe concussion finally broke her will and shut her mind and body down.

Three hours later her prayers were answered belatedly. Trudging home from a long day's labour Mama spotted the bundle of Uma's pink dress lying amongst the sun withered tall grasses and weeds. Screaming curses to the gods she flew down the road, each stride longer than the last as desperation pushed her on.

A heartbeat away from her child her weakened knees buckled where she dropped beside Uma's beaten body which lay curled and bloody like a stillborn callously tossed away to rot in the grass. What little control Mama had fled under the certainty that her bright little light had been extinguished and she had lost yet another beautiful child to this country's cruelty. Carefully, timidly, she rolled Uma onto her back and immediately retched when she saw her baby's battered distorted bloodied bruised, fly and ant-covered face. Like the breaking glass of a fire alarm, her heart shattered sending wailing laments flying across the fields, scaring birds from trees, and freezing rats mid-stride, before turning them all into stone.

Masses of worry pulled at her fractured mind as hatred entered her heart until shock and fear took over her wracked body that was using the last of its energy to produce thousands of little shivers. The thought that crippled her

the most as she rocked Uma in her thin hunger and overworked enfeebled arms was how do I take my little broken dead baby home. I cannot carry her all that way, yet I cannot leave her to go and get help. I can't leave my baby. I can't leave my baby to the crows. I can't, I can't and who will help us anyway. Who can I ask... Who do I dare ask for help...

## Section Eleven

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As Mama rocked fearfully, what can I do, what can I do, without thinking she started, as any caring mother would, to wipe the flies and ants away from her Uma with the end of her ragged shawl. Her heart broke again as she realised she could hardly bear to look at her child's destroyed face. But it's my child, I must look and so she did.

She could not help but be sickened. In her body, in her mind and spirit and for a system which allowed people to do this to a child, her child, any child. As she lovingly held and rocked her broken baby in her tired, excreta-splattered arms, her wretched tears cursed the world. Between each of her deep sobs, she implored God to do something, anything, to make my little light start burning again, for without my Uma, without my light, I cannot see, and I cannot and will not go on.

She was so lost in sadness and hatred that initially she missed the tingles and prickles that began running up and down her neck where her senses had noticed things about Uma that her eyes had missed.

Then in a sob, a screech, a scream of delight she noticed tiny droplets of watery blood bubbling from Uma's hideously swollen lips. My Uma is breathing! My Uma is still alive. She's still alive...

Beneath the watercolour backdrop of a delicate pink water-washed sky which God's artist had splashed through with yellow wisps and swirls of peach and blended into oranges that were edged with fiery reds that matched Mama's anger, she kept rocking Uma and vowed to do so forever if necessary.

There in that in-between time when nature holds its breath as darkness creeps in and wipes away the last of the flushing pinks from the canvas of a wicked day to add the white silvery glow of a new moon, Uma stirred and coughed. But Mama kept praying and rocking her child until the night was near pitch black, lit only by stars and a watery moon. "It's time to go home" Mama whispered as nosy bats squealed overhead.

Racked by a gripping hunger and her continuous enfeebling illness it was Mama's love that supported her daughter's slow agonised exhausted dispirited tiny hobbled steps. The journey home took an eternity but neither noticed the time, their bodies and minds were beyond such reckoning. Getting through the next step is all that mattered. First Mama's weakened shuffle and then Uma's slipping stumble.

Several hours later, thoroughly wracked and with nothing left to give they collapse inside their one-room home where they lay wrapped together until the early glimmers of the new day whispered far too soon, "It's time to awake. It's time for your suffering to begin again.

Section Twelve

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**T**hat morning Uma and her Mama had their first ever fight, although beaten and weakened it was little more than feathers punching at cotton wool.

Propped in her Mama's arms Uma full of disappointment, confusion, and frustration and with drool dribbling from her overblown lopsided uncontrollable lips feistily demanded to be allowed to go to school. "I want to show them I have courage. I want to grow up with the knowledge needed to help you and the village Mama. They won't rob me of school Mama, they won't." She said angrily as her little fists smacked the packed dirt floor. Or so she thought she had. But the words when they came out did not sound the same as they did in her head for their release was hindered by loose teeth, a swollen jaw and lips which spluttered confusedly.

But a Mama knows her baby and in Uma's case, exactly what she was trying to say. She also knew what was right for her and she struggled against her little lights determined will and on this matter she was just as determined as Uma to win the day.

"My little light, you can hardly see through those puffed bruised slits, or swallow or move. You're stiffer than old man Jacob and your face... Oh your blessed beautiful face, she uttered... where words failed as tears took over.

As they fell she spat on the hem of her dusty crumpled dress using it to make a clean path through the dried blood around Uma's mouth. where the pain caused Uma to flinch and push her hand away.

“And you slept in your dress. Look at it, it’s creased and dirty and covered in your blood. It’s ruined child. You can’t go to school looking like that.”

“I want them to see what they did to me and be sorry” Uma spluttered. “I won’t be robbed and I want them to know I will not be broken. I’m gonna go Mama I am” she threatened while struggling to stand. To her dismay, her legs refused to work and she slipped back down onto the floor. At her third attempt, she moaned, “Mama please help me stand Mama, please.”

“I will not help you to go and be killed” Mama scolded sharply. “I will not. They will kill you this time for sure. I know it! If you do this, you do it alone. I will not have another baby die. I will not help you.”

Uma sulked and wined, but Mama refused to help. Leaving Uma to sulk Mama set off to her favourite herb patch near the marsh where soon after she returned carrying a bunch of Kandeli leaves wrapped in a piece of material to smother their stings. After making them into an infusion she ordered Uma to drink it.

“There’s another batch ready for your lunch Uma. Heat it on the fire and you can eat the steeped leaves too. And make sure you drink it and don’t argue. And there is a little grain left in the sack. Pound it if you can and when I return later I will make your favourite flatbread. But now I must go.”

"But I wanna go to school Mama... I wanna go. Uma’s plaintiff cries followed Mama as she headed off with a heavy heart to start another day of muck carrying. “Oh I hope I can find the basket I dropped in the grass last night - if I don’t the Caste will beat me until I look like Uma or make me carry their waste in my hands.”

\*Kandeli is like European Nettles.

## Section Thirteen

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Uma's school days were over. She stayed at home where like so many other Dalits she learnt what being an untouchable in a country full of ignorance and hatred was all about.

Her education started a few days after her awakening when her Mama fell ill again and Uma had to help her in the killer latrines. Mama hustled her out of the door early so Uma would be spared the sight of the town's children rushing to school, but on that journey, Uma's concerned puffy, blackened but caring eyes were too fixed upon her frail Mama to care about anyone else.

The villagers were furious over Uma's beating and some came close to retaliatory violence. One young lad of seventeen tried to rally them into a lynch mob. "I will kill those boys, I will rip out their hearts and stick them on poles for all to see" he ranted, but Uma held up her hand to forbid that thought.

"I promise." She said quietly as their anger calmed. "I will learn what they don't want me to learn and I will use it to beat them with. We must not be violent - that is for losers, that is the Castes way. But to win I will need your help."

Then taking a leaf out of her Mama's book she added firmly so there was no mistaking her intent. "You are no use to me dead, or in jail."

Most villagers were not surprised by Uma's beating. They had suffered in similar ways, but they also held a hope that with each new generation of

children, things might be better. “But obviously not”, a few sighed. While others wondered, “How can India afford to waste the brilliant heart and mind of this little light we call Uma? What a disgusting crime.”

On the day of her beating Uma threw away her childish ‘Why’ and began the business of surviving in a brutal life she had no control over. Even at six years old she was aware that if she is unable to prevent this sick vilification from infecting her future children and their children and all the other children to come, she will lose all joy and become bitter. But hopefully, for her, that ending is not in God’s plan.

Because it was certainly not in hers. Her heart was set on creating a crack in the Caste’s wall for her Dalit kin to climb through and escape to a better life.

Unbeknown to Uma, another much older Dalit who shared similar thoughts was to appear in the village. She adopted him and called him Grandpa Sami. Then later in life Mentor Sami and sometimes even Guru Sami, or occasionally in affection, that wicked old man Sami, but always with a giggle or two. But best of all and mostly she would explain he was my friend and inspiration. He was also to give Uma a few very special life-changing gifts... But he had a bit of a difficult journey to make before he could arrive, as did Uma.

Chapter Seven

Uma And Priests

Section One

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When the class ended for the night and the children had rushed off to enjoy the last of the light in play Sita stayed behind. She did not want to face a husband she did not know who had tricked her and her family and have to sit with him and then later sleep beside his brothers in a tiny cramped shack.

Uma stayed with her. She understood Sita's feelings for she has seen such lost and bewildered looks a few times before and her heart went out to her.

"I know what, why don't I tell you a little more of my story" Uma suggested, "would you like to hear it?"

Uma quickly explained the background to her awakening as she calls it before starting her tale from that point on. She told it in the first person of course with loads of embroidery which wonderfully works in giggled conversations, but dies so dramatically when heard second hand, but here, in essence, is the story Sita listened to which invoked moments of shock and laughter which could be heard blessing or disturbing the air until the early hours of the morning.

## **As a young girl Uma learns about Priests and child sex slaves.**

Weeks after her awakening Uma watched Mama pound a few spindly heads of wheat they had gleamed together from a nearby field. She

was turning them into a grainy flour to be made into flat bread which was a dream to eat because not only did it contain lots of love but also a host of fantastic herbs.

Each morning before the sun's rays can fully bless the land Mama would go out and search for herbs growing amongst the soggy grasses near the marsh which much like an inky moat surrounded most of the village,

The marsh, instead of providing a ring of protection for the village as promised by the seller of the land, rose in the rainy season to flood them out. Uma's house was one of the few which somehow managed to stay clear of the water, though only just, for at times it would lap at the very door of their shack.

Living with the marsh was yet another trial these people endured. The Dalit villagers in their quiet dignified way often raised their voices to say a sarcastic thank you to that nice greedy Christian for selling them this scraggy land slap-bang in the middle of a paddy field or at other times in a dust bowl. They complained about the scam but the authorities refused to act. As Dalits living on the edge of a town they happily told them you have no right of recourse.

Their money had been stolen, so now they had put up with things and make do the best they can. But despite the problems it was still home to some. Uma grew up within its confines amongst people who loved her and despite the difficulties she had no wish to leave and explore the outside world, although at times its lure was strong, until...

## Section Two

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One morning after a young Uma wondered why Mama went out every day to collect herbs instead of resting, with a little mischievous light blessing her eyes Mama replied. "Well, bless me..., I'm surprised my bright little light cannot work that one out. We need to replace those herbs we use, as we do all things and if I don't get them today, tomorrow they might be gone. Then what would we do? Who would help us then?"

The truth was, Mama, loved foraging. Other than her daughter, searching for God's bounties as she called it, was her only pleasure in life. As she hunted through the weeds and grasses she communed with her heart and with her dear departed husband and darling daughters. For a little while at least she was free of the Caste and their tainted views. The herbs of course helped to add a little something nice to the scraps they ate. If there were no scraps then she would dry them for when their luck turned around. She bartered with them sometime too.

Testament to her hopes and beliefs and how much she missed her departed family could be found in their tiny living area where countless bunches of herbs in various stages of drying filled the room with their gorgeous aromas.

"You and these are my wealth", Mama often told Uma and would proudly recite the names of them all and explain their uses as a good mother should. She did her best to pass that knowledge on to Uma. The child could easily manage and recognise them but what Uma struggled with, which somehow her Mama seemed to do by magic, was mixing them to produce the rich pungent but wonderful tastes which so lifted the bread and her heart as she

ate it. Whenever Uma tried the taste was never the same and often her mixtures were foul.

“Oh my little sparkle you’ll get it one day” Mama said as she paused from tying new sprigs together to hug Uma’s heavily disappointed shoulders. “You have to learn to love the herbs then they will tell you what they need and when you give it to them, guess what, they will love you back. Just like you and me,” Mama teased kindly. Suddenly her face already pale with illness drained of all remaining colour while cold hard fear and hatred spat from her narrowed eyes.

Urgently snatching Uma’s hand she dragged her inside their shack. After pulling the door across, Mama stood resolutely with her back to it in the vain hope of keeping danger out.

“Quick” she ordered frantically, “get beneath the table, now and don’t come out till I fetch you.”

Terrified Uma clambered into the little depression her Mama had scooped out of the dry hard soil beneath their wonky table in readiness for such an occasion. She did not understand why at the time, but the fear on Mama’s face had been enough to catapult her into action. As she settled into the uncomfortable nest Mama spread a rush mat over her and then threw their meagre laundry on top in the hopes of fooling prying eyes.

“Stay there,” she ordered in a harsh whisper, praying her voice would not carry outside. “Don’t move! Don’t breathe! And certainly don’t sneeze...”

Section Three

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In the dark pit, laying beneath the crush of clothes and reeds, Uma heard the swish of the door open and then close. She guessed Mama had gone outside and fighting against the beginning of cramps she settled down to wait.

In what felt like a lifetime her fearful mind wandered along the paths of worry Mama had laid down in her young mind these past few weeks, where astutely she stopped when she reached a story Mama had told her about some Hindu Priests liking for young virginal Dalit girls. Where just like Mama's had, her fears blossomed.

Mama had explained bitterly that the ruling authorities call us liars when we complain about the priests working with traffickers. They deny it happens. But I guess you have to be a Dalit to know the truth of it, she explained when they talked about this evil a few nights back while sitting together watching the setting sun.

“You are coming near to the age they like.”

The release of those words caused the darkness to wrap around them while a chilled breeze raised their shivers when Mama then explained.

“They send watchers to keep an eye on young girls like you so they can snatch them when they are ready. So, never go into the toilet field without me or another adult with you. If you go alone, or with another girl, one day they will take you from me.”

Those frightening words had robbed Uma's eyes of their sparkle as her sense of worldly order crashed around her yet again.

"But Mama" she had protested strongly in her wide-eyed innocent way. She utterly refused to accept a single word of it. "A priest would not do that Mama, not even a Hindu Priest can be that evil."

"Oh my shaft of pure sunlight, yes they do and yes they are," Mama replied woefully, where her shoulders sagged and more lines were etched across her kindly but tired and drained face.

With a heart full of resignation she decided the time had come for Uma to know more about the wicked life inflicted upon the Dalit by those around them. She dreaded passing the knowledge on to her daughter and she deeply regretted stealing away a little more of her darling's childhood. But it had to be done if she is to understand and survive. Having lost one daughter to their evil, two children to starvation and illness while miscarrying several more as well as passing onto her darling husband a killer sickness she was not going to lose another heart's joy, not for anyone.

Tears for them both fell from Mama's eyes as she waggled her ears and tapped Uma's skull to show she should listen and remember. With a faraway look on her face, she opened up a long-closed story about her nine-year-old sister who would have been Uma's Aunt, but as soon as it started it was obvious to Uma the story was not just about Mama's sister.

With startled eyes, she listened spellbound.

## Section Four

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"**F**our other children disappeared at the same time as my sister and also from a nearby village, three more. All were taken by the same gang of men who everyone knew worked for the Priests. One night a few weeks later a girl managed to escape and made her way home. She had been..."

Uma's Mama paused with a face tormented by emotions. Then as she started the narrative again her voice cracked as she uttered, "...raped repeatedly by so-called Hindu Priests and wealthy Caste men who paid the Priests for the treat."

With frightened eyes brimming with questions and a heart bursting to ask all of them rapidly, Uma held herself in check and watched patiently while Mama dabbed her eyes before blowing hard into a handkerchief. Uma smiled weakly at the sudden honking and was glad of it, for it seemed to help Mama because then more calmly she resumed the tale.

"This young girl after telling some of the villagers her story left the house to do her toilet in the field, as we all have to do I guess," she shrugged.

"Anyway, she never returned. The whole village went out searching for her, but it was so dark it was hard enough finding yourself in the pitch black so we gave up. She was found early next morning lying strangled in the far corner of the field.

There was an uproar of course and the authorities decided it was an honour killing. They immediately arrested the father and took him away, although we all knew it wasn't him. We had been with the family all night through, but

they didn't care what we had to say. To them, we were only Dalit and our words had no truth. The authorities were happy they had a scapegoat which removed the blame from the wealthy Caste and the Priests. We all knew it was the Priests thugs who had returned and silenced her, but what could we do? So, my dearest friend lost both her sister and her father in one bad night."

Uma listened horrified. Only weeks ago she had been a happy little girl skipping to school with a heart full of joy and wonder. Now she was sitting distraught while witnessing sorrow grip her darling Mama so tight that she rocked as she spoke.

At six years old she did not understand rape, although she knew it was something really bad that some evil men did, but she found the story hard to accept for so many reasons. For one, why did Mama say they were slaves? But shrewdly judging now was not the right time for that particular question she held it close to her chest - for the moment anyway - to leave her free to ask the other question that was burning so strongly inside her.

"But the girls do return home, don't they Mama" she pleaded, willing it to be true. "Your sister came home, didn't she? She's OK now, isn't she Mama?"

Section Five

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**H**ave you ever met your Aunt?" Mama asked quietly by way of answer. "And no you haven't" she uttered with a forlorn shake of head. "And I'm afraid they never do come home. They get sold on until they are of no use to anyone and then they simply disappear."

The grief which crushed Mama's heart as she uttered the word home was apparent as she raised her eyes to the heavens where she mouthed a silent prayer for the dead.

Uma watched heartbroken, but also suddenly glad and inspired for she understood now why most Dalits had come to embrace Christianity. Strangely, although she understood little about religion, the thought of a loving Father watching over them calmed her. Although in reality, many Christians in India followed the Caste practises when it comes to how they treat the Dalits, but she had yet to learn that bigotry and discrimination lay at the heart of most religions.

She waited patiently for Mama to end her prayer, but she desperately wanted to understand why Mama had called the Dalits slaves. She was a Dalit, but she wasn't a slave, was she? She had been called that before too and had been just as confused.

At the time Mama refused to answer, which was vexing. Mama always answered her questions, even when she threw them at her while she toileted in the field behind their home. The answers she received were sometimes terse and not always the ones she expected, but she always got an answer.

Only to recall she didn't always.

Mama had never answered when she asked what happened to the Dalit boy they heard about whose head was repeatedly bashed against the temple wall until his skull was fractured in four places because he dared ask the priest for one of the sweets he was giving out to the Hindu children.

As she huddled in her crude nest waiting for Mama to tell her it was safe to come out she mulled over the question of slavery but could not find an answer to that either.

Scared, she listened to the drone of muffled voices where she picked out Mama's and another, a much deeper sterner one belonging she guessed to a man. When she heard a slap and Mama gasp she carefully wiggled her tiny backside around in a desperate bid to deepen the shallow scraping, if only an extra centimetre or two. Then she heard the doors swoosh as it was pulled open and then heavy footsteps invading their home.

The few cupboard doors they had were opened and then slammed shut. The same happened with the two drawers they kept Uma's drawings in. She heard sounds of papers being roughly handled and she wanted to leap out and tell whoever it was to leave them alone because they are the pictures I drew for Mama, but wisely she buttoned her lip. With a thudding heart, she felt the vibrations of the footsteps stamping about hard until suddenly they stopped by the wonky table.

## Section Six

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Uma held her breath and tried desperately not to sneeze. Carefully she brought her arm around and pinched her nose just in case, but mid-move she froze as she felt the laundry on top of her move. Believing she had been discovered she almost yelped in relief when the steps moved away. Then she heard the familiar crinkling of dried herbs being ripped from their hangings. Whoever owned the heavy footsteps was stealing handfuls of Mama's lovingly collected and carefully dried herbs and it angered her to think someone would want to steal the very little they had.

But before that issue could bind her mind in knotty quandaries she heard the door swoosh again. Did that mean someone had entered or left? Had her Mama come in? Was her Mama OK? Frightened, Uma lay rigid, without a twitch or movement other than to exhale quietly in little controlled bursts and then just as carefully refill her aching lungs while trying her best to still a racing heart.

In fearful silence, she waited for Mama to say everything was alright. It took a while but eventually helping Uma out of the hole Mama gave her a quick dust down before hugging her gorgeous little light from god so hard that she nearly crushed Uma's ribs. Mama's frightened trembles passed into her where they mixed with her own. Holding each other tightly they quaked together like a pharmaceutical agitator, while each tried their hardest to calm the other.

"It's OK," Mama said soothingly, when she found her voice. "They did not come for you today, they were just, well shall we say, nosy about you. I told

them you had gone north to be with family. They won't be back for a while but do keep on your guard. OK?"

Over the coming weeks, Uma worked tirelessly to improve her underground lodgings. If any of the neighbours wondered where the baskets of soil she was emptying outside came from they were far too polite to ask.

Section One

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Still young but much wiser, Uma comes to learn that tragedy strikes when least expected.

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Over the next few years there were a few near misses - men came searching for victims and Uma hid in her slightly more comfortable hole.

Occasionally, sadly, girls did disappear, mainly at night, so once the sun had set Uma and Mama tried their best to stay inside. If they desperately needed to go out to the toilet they called upon neighbours and together as a protective group they entered the fields. In that way, Mama's ray of sunshine along with many other children were kept safe.

The worry of course still hung around like odorous dog poo left to bake in the sun, but luckily for Uma fate happened along to lend a hand.

Chapter Eight

Uma And Grandpa

Section One

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**A**n old Dalit couple in their twilight years with a little money had moved from a distant region and settled at the edge of the village so they could be near their son who lived in the town. However, their shack was very different to those around them. It was larger with a small veranda while the couple also owned some wonderful books and pieces of furniture. But fantastically, they also installed a porcelain toilet which their son connected to a soak away. In those days, in those parts, that was an almost unknown and highly enviable luxury, even amongst the Caste.

Uma's lively seven-year-old charm, quick cleverness and open-hearted affection soon ensured she was the apple of their eye. In return, she adopted them as her honorary Grandparents and visited often to either borrow or return books, help to tidy things up or fetch water, or bits of food, where of course during her visits she simply had to use their facilities. Didn't she... But the part Uma loved most was listening to the old man's tales or his sometimes loudly delivered postulations about many worldly things.

Slowly and quite deliberately, after noting the child's natural intelligence was shamefully going to waste, as he said one night while discussing Uma with his wife, he started working hard to reawaken Uma's thirst for knowledge. One of his more risky but amusing ideas had her rocking with laughter and so much so that she was never to forget his brilliantly outrageous tale.

Many years later, the memory of that moment can still stir her soft chuckles or it bullies its way to the fore of her mind to paint a much-needed smile upon her tired or saddened face as she deals with the fallout from yet another

Caste outrage.

## Section Two

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A warning. Some might consider parts of this offensive. But ho hum to them... It's an opinion and all opinions have the right to be aired and accepted or dismissed as egos or hearts might want, or not.

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"**T**his", he chuckled even while recalling the idea, "is a slanted view of the origins of a Hindu and I will not apologise for it," he smirked while looking down at the firefly seated comfortably by his slippers feet. Where he paused for a beat to smile into her upturned and bright eager face, where to his joy he fell once again in love with her sparkling intelligence, which shone so strongly from her glistening brown eyes.

This young girl, he mused, could grow up to be so much more if only the foolish Caste would let her. With a sigh at Caste stupidity he began, "If they are upset by my words, it will serve them right for endorsing a system of tyranny. Are you ready for blast off child?"

Her head bobbed up and down eagerly, while her little heart raced with mounting excitement where she scolded impatiently, "Well, do get on with it Grandpa... You know I want to know everything."

"Well then, so you shall", he said chuckling at her forthrightness before smiling at her charming little twitches born from an eagerness to learn. "The Hindu teachings suggest the Upper Caste, the ruling Caste if you like, were created from the head of their God, while the lower Caste, the servants were

created from his feet. We Dalits exist outside of that silly arrangement, because this is what they think of us,” he said where to Uma’s delight he stood and slightly bent at the knees and then started staggering around the room mimicking a monkey’s walk and their startled face.

“That is what they think of us,” he said scornfully as he reclaimed his seat.

“Anyway, we have explained the head and feet and the other Caste are obviously created from various body parts in between, or so I guess. But just for the fun of it Uma, my musings have led me to wonder whether the administrators and politicians of India were created from the penis of their God. Or even more specifically,” he offered with a smile, “the administrators from their Gods penis and the politicians from his anus.”

He did not need to ask Uma what she thought of that.

Blushing slightly at his daring, Uma loved every naughty word against the Caste and she thought him so right. They did deserve it. In later life whenever she was being browbeaten by those who laughingly considered themselves her better, she would recall his words and her renewed amusement would smooth away any flutters of indignation that begged to unsettle her spirit.

Unknown to Uma at the time he was arming her future well.

## Section Three

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Her adopted Grandpa taught his little flower of India, as he affectionately called her, many things which through the years would cheer her in times of stress. In turn, she grew to expand his ideas and pass them on to any Dalit willing to listen, so they too might be soothed by his wisdom.

There was one idea that on the outside was not especially amusing, but deep down when explored fully it was destined to bring a smile to her face whenever she recalls it.

“Tyranny,” he had announced almost pompously and quite out of the blue one day, “only works if you let it. They can beat your body, they can invade it, but the mind and heart are always yours. If you keep those shielded against them it will be they who will be imprisoned by their tyranny as their teeth will gnash uselessly. And you my little flower,” he had said while ruffling her hair “will always remain free, so long as you keep your heart and mind your own ...”

He had bent down then creakily to say the following words into her ears and eyes while taking the moment to affectionately tweak her eagerly upturned cheek. “And I know that you are strong enough to never let them break you.”

“Oh I won’t let them do that my Sami,” she nodded with all the solemnity that a seven-year-old can muster who only half understood his well-intentioned gush. “And I never will.” She added just as profoundly.

She was not quite sure what she was promising her Grandpa Sami, as she

called him then but as she grew older her understanding of that moment grew with her.

Years later she often found herself nodding along with her child self while smiling at the name she had bestowed on him, Sami. It was not his real name. His was a fine long unpronounceable strange knotted tangle of sounds which always tripped her young tongue whenever she tried to say them together, but the overall sound shortened very nicely to Sami which suited her tongue so much better. He, for his part, was rather chuffed with the name and he willingly adopted it.

Years later after she told the other village children about him they would march about chanting, Guru Sami said this, Guru Sami said that... Where the sound of his name always made her smile because she knew he would be smiling somewhere too.

As that reflection fades, another might beg to be recalled. She was a month older when he pounced on her with this thought.

“Why do you think the Caste force such degrading jobs upon us Dalits?”

Section Four

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Often when she visited there was no hello or how are you preambles, merely a question which he expected his little bright flower to think over and consider like an adult might, while overlooking that she was only a little shoot while figuratively he was a towering oak with a full canopy.

When he first joked to her about being an oak with a full canopy Uma had jumped upon his lap and stood on his thighs. With mischievous eyes and a smile she started messing his thinning hair, while with a hint of a giggle declaring, “I don’t think it is a full canopy Sami, there are some big gaps in it.”

He had laughed uproariously while mentally adding another reason to his long list of reasons why he so adored this little girl. Oh, how he wanted to see her grow tall and wise and lead his people to freedom. If anyone can, he decided, it will be this little flower of India. Often he prayed he might live long enough to witness it. It was true that he doubted the deprived child would ever grow physically tall, for there was so little of her, but what she lacked in height and build she made up for in beauty of spirit and face and courage, charm, compassion and a bright intelligence which sometimes left him staggering because of its accuracy.

He once said to his long-suffering but loving wife, “India has lost a great student through the ignorance of those oafish boys who so cruelly beat her. I can only guess they felt the greatness straining inside her to get out and were scared by it.”

As much as his wife agreed with him, on most things anyway, when he asked Uma, “Why do you think they force degrading jobs upon you?” she shot up angrily to sternly admonish him. “You can’t ask the little petal questions like that. You just can’t...”

He knew she meant it, because she was wagging her finger sternly about an inch away from his face. That act always prefaced trouble. So he was not surprised when she scolded. “She’s way too young to understand the ideas you’re filling her head with.”

But this time, rather than sheepishly apologising to keep the peace, he protested. “I rather think I can ask her that,” he said pointedly, while peering over his glasses at her as she twittered before him much like a broody hen bird about to nest.

“This is a bright little light we have here, and we must not repress her intelligence as the Caste do! But if it makes you happy I’ll help Uma along a little” he offered as a truce.

In a whisper to Uma as his wife stepped outside to cool off, he suggested, “It can be a long time between suppers when she’s upset with me like that.”

“Anyway,” he said raising his voice because he didn’t doubt his wife was somewhere close by listening and ready to pull his ears if he played up.

“They are trying to break spirits, that’s why. But in 5000 years of suffering torment, we Dalits still have our spirits and many are as strong and as bright as yours. OK so far?”

Yes, Uma nodded eagerly as she waited for more of his wisdom and he was not to fail her.

“Your real job then and the one I am giving you and not the one they will force on you,” he said shaking his head to emphasise she should listen and understand, “Will be to teach others the same things I am teaching you. Remember my words and keep them close to you so they are always at hand. When tyranny has no victims to torment, it falters and then starts to fall apart.”

And then he chuckled, “We the Dalit will have them because through that crack in their wall, the one you keep telling me about and yes Uma I agree with you about it, we will disappear into freedom and in doing so, we will destroy the Caste system.”

## Section Five

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Uma, as was her way, thought about it for a moment, where one large question formed in her mind causing her to fidget a little while shuffling her words into some sort of order.

“Are you saying my Grandpa Sami,” she ventured uncertainly, “that we will fight them with our pots and brooms or by throwing pooh at them and things like that?” Only to immediately smirk at the idea and then giggle loudly as she imagined her Mama flinging baskets of pooh in their faces.

While her ideas were serious, even if her weapons were somewhat unrealistic, he laughed loudly along with her, but most certainly not at her.

“No, my little flower” he answered tenderly but with laughter still twinkling in his eyes. “We will not have to fight them that way. They will fight and destroy themselves. When the Dalit throw off the Caste system there will be no non-caste to rule over, but someone will have to fill the jobs we leave behind. And not one of them of course will want to. So they will squabble like rats in a sack and the system will crumble around their ears. You see, for all their brutality they need the Dalit to keep their system alive. Without us, there is no system. That is why they enforce it so strictly and harshly. They are scared of us and they know that one day the Dalit will rise peacefully to taunt them with exactly that fear.”

Then he finished by sternly adding, “And don’t you ever forget that.”

She never did and today, much older and wiser, it forms the heart of her

campaigns and teachings.

Not long after that thrilling and enlightening conversation the tide of Uma's life was to change yet again.

Section Six

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**D**uring one especially heavy monsoon the old man Sami and his wife contracted phenomena. Unable to locate a Doctor who was willing to attend the Dalit village they sadly died. Or as Uma demanded her Mama believed, they died together.

Uma was heartbroken. But she put aside her sadness to help the son who came to clear out their belongings. Very soon working to his parent's carefully drafted instructions Uma's little shack was extended, where the porcelain toilet complete with a soak-away was proudly installed. Uma lovingly accepted the books from the son and stored them anywhere she could. "You can have them as long as I don't trip over the things" Mama had agreed - that was the deal they struck anyway - though they both knew the books would never be thrown out, but the threat was good enough to keep Mama's lively little light of god under a modicum of control.

Many years later, looking back, Uma would say those times were the best of her life, though she desperately missed the old couple, even in later years. They had been her link to a much wider world as they often talked about their other children who lived abroad and they had also travelled themselves a little.

A month or so after their passing, to Uma's utter surprise her Mama rushed home one night waving a thick envelope in her hand and yelling, "You have a letter, Uma. My light has a letter," she shouted into the night before breaking down and sobbing with pride. It was indeed a major event. Few people in the village ever received letters. Sitting together Mama and daughter ran their

fingers across the strange stamps while wondering who it was from.

“I could open it you know,” Uma chuckled as she tugged the letter out of her Mama’s trembling hand. Then with Uma perched on Mama’s lap and beneath the glow of candlelight, together they read Uma’s first letter, the one of many she was to receive over the years.

It was from a young girl, three years Uma’s senior, a granddaughter of Sami’s and before he passed away he wrote to ask her to write to Uma. Her letters were full of lively sparkling news and ideas and jokes and silly girly things which utterly charmed Uma. They instantly connected and got on, as they say, like a house on fire where many years on they still do.

That charming, gentle, loving intelligent old man, her Grandpa Sami had gifted Uma with so many blessings, why oh why she wondered can’t all of mankind be like that?

Within months of the first wonderful letter, the walls of their shack were papered with photos of Rachael’s home and town and holidays and other travels where Uma’s understanding of the world around her grew rapidly. The word ‘Why’ once more entered her vocabulary with as much joy as it did when she was three. Rachael obligingly answered her with packages of books, magazines and long long, very long letters. Sometimes two would arrive in a week and she was also careful to wrap up a paper money note to help Uma pay for her postage. It was always more than needed and sometimes Uma bought her Mama a treat which they ate together outside, or sometimes even they bought medicines or disinfectant.

Uma’s world expanded and in turn, when she shared the contents of Rachael’s letters to the other village children she opened their hearts and minds. Without realising it by the age of eleven she had become a teacher and her Mama would watch, smiling proudly as her little light settled crossed-

legged on the grass ready to pontificate to a group of wide-eyed youngsters.

Her little mischievous and bright madam may well have risen to the lofty heights of Teacher in the eyes of the children, but to her Mama, she was still her little light, and long may she keep shining.

# Chapter Nine

## Uma Grows Up

# Section One

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Uma suffers another momentous loss while also finding something wonderful.

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**A** few years on, standing in their doorway Mama filled with pride watched her darling Uma begin teaching another group of children their letters. One little girl of about six was running around just like Uma once did, knickerless and shoeless without care or worry, which is as it should be, really Mama reflected. It is wicked men who ruin such innocent moments. Pushing the thought to one side she grinned as she imagined Uma doing just that today. "Not a chance," she chuckled. "That young madam pushes me out of the shack so she can wash and dress in private, and never a mind for the monsoons!"

She chuckled again as a couple of Gunter's hens wandered into the teaching circle where with a clap of hands Uma sent them scattering off, though in the way of hungry chickens, they settled close by. Soon they were wandering back into the circle in their never-ending quest for crumbs. "They are just like us," Mama sighed.

Where her mind then wandered as her little light hustled the hens away yet again. It was not too many years ago when Uma spent lots of time playing with those very same hens, she reflected. She even raised a chick or two from stray eggs she found lying around. That was not long after the photographers left, Oh, what age was she then? She wondered, "Five? Six?"

If she recalled correctly they had been making flatbread, but didn't they always and she had teasingly asked Uma what she wanted for tea. "You can have flat bread my light, or.... flat bread or if you're really really lucky you can have ...."

"Flatbread" Uma had yelped loudly, before joining in with Mama's laughter. But then Uma's huge brown eyes caught the glint of the sun where they danced with pixie light as she whispered naughtily, "Or Mama... we could have an egg."

"Oh no you don't," she had admonished her, although she knew as soon as her words tumbled out they were going to fall uselessly to the ground and lay forgotten. "Do not steal any of grumpy Gunter's eggs, he'll paddle your backside hard if he catches you."

She smiled at another mental image of Uma with her hands planted firmly on her hips and the look of righteous certainty etched upon her young face as she retorted, "Oh no he won't, cos I know things about him Mama."

"Really? Mama had wondered, where with a light heart that was just as mischievous as her daughters she had purred, "Do tell all my little light, quickly, else I'll paddle you myself."

Making well sure she was well out of reach, Uma laughed, "On no, you won't..., but I'll tell you anyway. I've seen him play with his thingy when he toilets in the field."

"You never have!"

"I have!" She declared with solemn nods of head as if the mere action would prove it true. "So Mama, he won't tell me off, or I'll just tell on him."

“I rather think you just did,” Mama chuckled. “You go do what you have to do...” she then said. “Because I know you will anyway, but be careful and I think it might be a good idea if you were to put some clothes on first. Don’t you?”

Startled by the revelation, Uma had looked down at herself as if she had forgotten she hadn’t dressed, even though it was tea time already. And of course, the madam had something to say about that too, as she did most things.

“And what’s wrong with this?” She asked frankly, while pinching the skin of her starved tummy. “It’s alright, it’s clean and there are no tears in it, so what more could anyone want?” She said cheekily as she gave Mama a twirl.

“There is a little tear in it,” Mama had whispered as she recalled Uma’s beating, but more to herself than to Uma, to whom more loudly, she said, “But I guess you will please yourself, you usually do. But don’t come coming crying back to me for pity when you sting your butt in the kandeli patch that surrounds old Gunter’s hut.”

## Section Two

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Huffily, Uma had thrown on a pair of her sister's old shorts before running off. Twenty minutes later she was back with dirty knees, Kandeli bites on her bare legs while carefully clutching five very warm shiny brown chicken eggs.

They had one each for tea, while the others were encouraged under Uma's concentrated ministrations to hatch. The way she fussed, Mama had wondered if they dare do anything else. If her Uma wants them to hatch, then hatch they will. And blessedly they did.

Weeks later holding the hatchlings gently in her outstretched hands Uma strode through the village and solemnly presented them to Gunter along with the words "We ate two eggs for tea, but you can add these to your flock, but we'll want some of the eggs later!"

They became firm friends after that and Uma often raised a chick or two for him and if the chicks were not begging Gunter for food they followed their Mama Uma to beg off her instead. What was surprising was that Gunter became friendlier toward the other villagers and soon little flocks of two or three birds sprung up everywhere. Sometimes diets were more egg than bread, but her Uma had grown strong on it, so who cared? Mama often wondered if Uma ever did threaten Gunter to tell everyone about his particular habits in the toilet field. It would certainly explain a lot, she smirked.

Proudly, while watching Uma's antics with the hens, she thought, even then

my little light was pulling the village together, where instead of fighting they helped each other.

Suddenly from nowhere, she was struck by the thought that Uma never did learn to blend herbs in the magical way she does. She felt both a little smug for her skill and regret for Uma's future husband who would be denied the blessing of tasty food. Then weirdly she suddenly felt neither. Nothing other than a heavy weariness that came to wrap itself around her.

While smiling at her daughter's efforts to shoo away the hens, again, her legs suddenly buckled and she slumped against the door frame. As her heavy eyes closed she uttered her child's blessed name softly before gracefully sliding to the ground, where her last few moments were graced by the blessing of her daughter's melodious laughter.

When Uma discovered her later, the faintest of smiles was playing upon her beautiful lips. Lips which had once lively expressed soft and playful admonishments or parted to issue sweet soothing words or declarations of motherly love. Which all spun around in Uma's head in a tearful cloud as she looked down at her fallen, though never to be forgotten, beloved Mama.

Section Three

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**T**here is no need to extol at length about Uma's pain, anyone who has lost a Mama that lived only to love their child will understand and feel for her young heart at that time. But like a true strong Dalit, Uma bore it all with fortitude until the doctor arrived and then for a few beats her courage collapsed and her heart broke.

He was not a doctor, as such. Doctors were rare in this Dalit village, but the death had to be certified by someone official - not that they ever cared anything in life about them, but death well... Into his stern face Uma almost snapped, oh, you've come to cross the name of an available slave off your list, have you. But something in the way his shoulders slumped as he stepped into the shack prevented her.

To Uma's surprise, he turned out to be a fair man who despite the urgings of his Caste, saw Uma and her brethren as people, not vermin. That was immediately obvious when he shook Uma's hand and offered words of condolence.

Uma's control slipped a little when he noticeably sniffed the herbs and a fond smile touched his face as he said, "Your Mama put lots of love into collecting those I think." Then he asked politely, "May I" as he pulled out their only chair where without fear of catching the untouchables contagion he sat down to start the process of questioning Uma and form filling. Another piece of her control slipped when he chuckled at the wonky table's wobbles which tried to interfere as he set about laying out the forms.

“Whoaa, steady,” he laughed and just like her Mama so often did, he used his spare hand to stop it wobbling.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but I need to examine your Mama, if I may.” When Uma’s face fell at the idea of Mama being violated even in death, he offered soothingly, “I’ll be careful and respectful...” Then as Uma’s tears finally won the battle and started to cascade down her cheeks and splash onto the forms he had so carefully arranged, he said gently. “I promise I’ll be respectful.”

“Heart failure” he pronounced later with his pen poised ready to enter those misleading words into the box headed, Cause Of Death.

“Please don’t write that,” Uma pleaded. “Please. We both know it wasn’t heart failure. She died from the many diseases she caught over the years through her job which weakened her condition. My Mama’s heart was big and strong,” she sobbed loudly. “She had the biggest ever. She did...”

Kindly, out of respect for this likeable little girl’s sadness, he sat quietly and waited patiently for her tears to subside. There was little he could do for her, or about the cause of death. With 700,000 to 1.3m Dalits performing unsanitary duties within the latrine business these types of death were very common, although the true reason for a death was never officially acknowledged.

As it did Uma, the situation irked him, but at the same time, as things were how could the deaths be acknowledged? While it would be impossible to write long lists of multiple diseases and infections and explain how each one over the years had played a part in weakening the body until it was unable to fight any more. As was the case here. Plus of course on the world’s political stage, India’s officials deny the practice of manual scavenging and so the true causes of death have to be hidden to prevent world outcry. He understood the reasoning, although he hated being part of the plot.

“I have to write that,” he explained gently as Uma showed signs of settling. “And as much as it professionally offends me to state heart failure as the cause of her passing, in a way it is true. Her heart did fail. So I hope you understand that I cannot write anything else.”

He stood slowly then, where carefully splitting the forms he gave her a copy along with the words, “You’ll need these papers to register your Mama’s death.” But then to Uma’s profound surprise, shock even, he hugged her tight and kissed her forehead - he was the first man other than Sami ever to do that. She was staggered and for once speechless. Then he smiled as he said. “See we are not all monsters or unintelligent flies fighting over a pile of dung. Some of us are enlightened and we know your true story and are appalled by the treatment you Dalits receive every day. You have our, shall we say, silent blessing. But now I have to go and remember, always take care, Uma, please.”

## Section Four

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As the door swished to a close behind him a few of Sami's prophetic words came to caress her mind. This doctor did not represent a crack in the Caste system, as such, but his attitude was certainly the start of a thin pencil line faintly marking the place where one day the crack will appear and be the strongest. Yes, she decided, it was a start and she clung to the notion like an ant will a piece of straw riding the swirls of flood waters.

Her next brush with officialdom was less kindly or understanding. The time had come to arrange Mama's burial and it was then that the effronteries to her peoples really hit home. They eventually found a place for her to rest in a corner of a Christian cemetery amongst what was considered by both the Caste and the local Christians to be unclean scrubland, fit only for the bodies of Dalits and stray dogs to lay in.

"So what if we are Dalit! At least this land is truly ours and we did not steal it," Uma muttered testily as she stood back from the freshly filled grave.

Then with scorn she thought, and at least my darling Mama will not be infected by their filth any more. "I'm glad you are laying separate from them," she whispered adding a cursing inflection to the last word as she looked across the cemetery.

Gently, with the reverence of a daughter for a much loved Mama she placed a bunch of herbs on top of the freshly turned soil along with a promise to return soon. Then with heavy heart, she set off on the long trek home. It was nearly the same route she took as a beaten six-year-old and although she was

physically fitter this time, her feet never-the-less dragged with every step while sadness knotted her stomach so tight that it became a struggle to lift her feet. As she moved further and further away from the buried heart of her life, each step fell heavier than the last. Finally, she managed to reach a sorry excuse for a crossroad which marked the halfway point of her journey.

Her route was straight on while turning right would lead her to another Dalit settlement, one similar to her own but belonging to a different skein. Their kind swept the roads and helped to keep the town clean and were reviled a little less than the manual scavengers.

But instead of walking straight on, she flopped tiredly down into the long grass at the edge of the gritty dirt road to rest. But as the sun kissed her face it tempted her eyes to close and she slipped into a light doze and then on deeper into dreams where to her joy she was once more talking with Mama while she made her famous flatbread. Even deep in sleep, she realised she never wanted to wake up again. “And I don’t think I will Mama she said in her dream. I want only to be with you.”

“But you can’t be, not yet”, Mama argued.

“But I can and I will Mama,” Uma protested, “did you not always teach me to trust my heart? And my heart says it needs to be with you Mama.”

And so she lay as still as death while the sun passed through the sky to close on this, the worst day of her life. But now that she was with Mama again nothing else really mattered, least of all waking up.

While Uma called out for death to take her, Mama’s spirit fretted for the life of her fantastic child who had no wish to look on the light of day or any day ever again.

And her spirit broke.

Chapter Ten

Uma Moves On

Section One

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**T**he cranky tinkle of a bicycle bell followed by a slight scrunch of tyres scrabbling for grip on loose grit as the rider brought it to a skidding halt scared Uma awake.

Shooting upright and shielding her eyes she squinted into the low but bright sunlight in the general direction of the noise.

“Are you OK?” A gentle voice enquired politely. “Can I help you? And I promise I won’t touch you,” the lad, who was about the same age as Uma explained matter-of-factly. “Because I am Dalit,” where Uma could not help but notice he uttered the word Dalit with a touch of pride and it both pleased and calmed her racing heart. “But if I can help in some other way then I will be pleased to. You have only to ask.”

Just to prove how helpful he could be his shadow fell across her face easing the brightness of the sunlight which enabled her to see him better. Where she looked appraisingly at the debonair figure sat astride a well-cared-for bicycle, only then to smile, and yes enthralled as his hand lazily pushed back a smooth but unruly mop of thick dark hair from his eyes. Immediately, a shaft of sunlight came to add the kiss of a sparkle to bless them, while a subconscious slow shy smile played across his lips, teasing them to part slightly to tantalise her with a glimpse of white even teeth.

“I’m Dalit too,” Uma answered gladly and without thinking about it, or without a blush of shame - after all, she was always one to speak her heart. Where she added brightly, “And right now I couldn’t be happier about it and

I don't care if you know my heart or my name which is Uma."

"And I'm Soli," he proudly but shyly declared. "And I am glad I pleased you," he chirped happily as he dropped his bike into the grass to squeeze his smartly dressed and lithe figure in beside her. Both were abundantly aware there was plenty of space for him elsewhere, but noticeably neither shifted. Not even a little and anyway, who was there out here to chaperone them? Their knees touched as he settled where he turned and offered a half-hearted apology for the intimate intrusion, but when their eyes met fully for the first time, our little Uma fell headlong into his twin pools of liquid heaven, as she thought them, without wish to ever look away ever again.

Her heart loudly proclaimed to her whirling brain, Mama sent this lad to me, I just know it and where her heart silently screamed her heartfelt thanks. Snatching a shy peek at his handsome, gentle yet strong face the words her Mama sometimes used to explain esoteric things slipped into her mind. "In death, there is also life and you must engage it when you find it, or else you will lose it."

Dutifully, for once, little Uma did exactly as her Mama bid her.

In the way of soul mates, they talked for hours where their words saw off the sinking sun and were carried up to the rising moon by nosy night owls who had nothing better to do but act as go-betweens. When the tentative fingers of the early morning sun reached out to explore the sky, it found them sleeping propped against each other, hands entwined with hearts beating as one. Where gently, its warming touch carefully prised them apart.

## Section Two

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Rising together slowly, silently and extremely happy and comfortable in the company of the other - their minds were already exchanging the invisible words of close lovers - Soli walked along beside her. Uma smiled at his crumpled light grey linen trousers and grass-stained white shirt and thought, he isn't quite so impeccable now, but then I guess, neither am I.

As they walked together his hand shyly reached for hers at the very same moment as hers was seeking his. They spoke few words and when they did they were whispered and gentle, compassionate and caring while their swelling emotions rampaged wildly within pounding hearts.

As they strode through the village towards her little home which had come to feel so large and empty without her Mama to fill it, some of the villagers hurried out to greet her, worried because she had not returned after the funeral.

“Oh Dear,” Uma whispered. “Now we’re done for!”

“No we’re not” he whispered back with gentle authority, “leave it to me.” which sent a delightful shiver running down her spine as their hands gripped tighter.

When the villager’s eyes settled on the pair, no words were needed to explain things. It was plain for all to see that here effervescing before them was a blessing from God himself.

Soli bravely stepped up to address the rapidly milling crowd. Claspig Uma's hand he said politely, but with strong undeniable emotions, "I have brought back your little flower so she might once again be replanted in her chosen place to grow strong amongst the love of her kin. I give you my Uma, to care for, as I, one day, hope to care for her too."

As he made his honest declaration a few kind mutters arose from the crowd,

"Is he asking to marry her?"

"She's still so young."

"He's young too, but handsome though."

"Her Mama has only just passed."

"This meeting was quick."

"They truly are Radha and Krishna."

"It hasn't been arranged."

But loudest of all were two thoughts which overrode all the others. "This is our little Uma and she knows her mind better than most."

But the most important one went as follows,

"Oh, what the heck. Let them be! Love has had a hand in this and the child deserves some happiness."

Then down to the very last person,, the village gave their blessings to the love-spun pair who up until five minutes ago had no idea about marrying, but now it was all they wanted.

As did Soli's parents who immediately fell for the charm, the gentle nature and bright, quick-witted intelligence of the beautiful little flower of India.

Within the fortnight they were married.

Section Three

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To suggest it was a match made in heaven may sound trite, but the simple fact is, it was - with a little help from Mama's spirit.

Uma's first belief that Soli was a gift from Mama struck her again when he entered her home properly for the first time and placed his holdall upon the wonky table. When it rocked his face broke into an easy smile, though the clincher, as they say, was his reaction to the herbs.

"Wow," he uttered as their aroma filled his nostrils. Without further word, he eagerly grabbed bunches off their hangings and set about dicing and mixing them ready for use.

"This mix," he suggested full of enthusiasm, "will be good for flatbread, and this pile here will work well with fish if we get some - and I know just the river where they are fat and lazy and easily caught."

Uma smiled as he whistled happily and worked his magic with the same skill as her Mama.

"But you know what, my lovely Uma," he asked with a voice light and full of laughter, "I haven't a clue what any of these are called. I just know the smells and how they work together."

"Oh, but I know what they are," she whispered modestly, while rather forwardly raising his herb-scented hands to her lips to kiss them.

“And I also know, my Soli,” she giggled enjoying the thought that he was now hers, “that you and I will make great things together.”

“And we will,” he agreed which he then showed by kissing her forehead, “but now I have to leave for work.”

With regret and an unfamiliar surge of longing, she watched him cycle away.

“Be safe my lover,” she whispered into the wind where she begged it to carry her words off to his heart. “Please come back to me,” she whispered again as he passed beyond sight. “And with God’s blessing, I’ll be here waiting.”

Two worries clouded her happiness. His safety and the spectre of manual scavenging. Now that Mama was gone she will be ordered to take her place. Indeed, many villagers were surprised to find that the Caste had not stormed into her shack the moment Mama passed to demand she takes up the work. She had received a rare reprieve, one that had its roots in the lie Mama told years before to the man that Uma had hidden from beneath the table. The authorities still believed that Uma was ‘up north’.

As for her Soli, Uma was right to be worried. Not all Dalits make it home. Especially children or those not yet adults, just like Soli and Uma.

As Uma waved him off and sent her heart after him Sami’s words came back to her. “The Dalits” he had explained, “just like the rest of India’s extreme poor, endure in a harsh regime geared to shovelling wealth into the mouths of the rich, without any regard or respect for the slaves chained to their shovels. Other than of course, conspiring to find ways to wring out the last vestige of hope from their broken hearts or minds.”

When he had asked do you understand all that, she dutifully nodded yes and despite his wife’s forbidding frown he went on to suggest. “If these tyrants

could, they would find a market to barter that it in as well. One wonders if the notion of reselling body parts has filtered through to the upper Caste yet. But once it does you can expect to see fields of Dalits, fed and watered like a herd of goats to be used for body parts. But they'll mind not to over feed or water them, why waste valuable assets - give them just enough to keep their bodies functioning and growing.”

## Section Four

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"Who knows what atrocities these Caste monsters will dream up next?" Sami had ended angrily. Where in common with his concerned wife he had thought, maybe I've just gone a bit too far for such a young child - even one as bright as she.

Uma never forgot that comment. And it worried her then as she returned to the shack. Their shack, which brought a smile to her worried frown as she stepped into those shadows where Mama's spirit waited to comfort her child.

As far as Uma knew Sami's predictions have yet to come to pass, but she knows that evil sees and evil does and not long after Sami's stern procrastination and then his sad passing she was to learn from Rachael, Sami's granddaughter and her then new pen friend, that in a manner, such harvesting is beginning to happen in many poor areas around the world. Poor areas, Rachael explained, that my daddy says are rapidly spreading into many affluent countries. Yes Uma, she ended her letter, be careful as Evil sees and Evil does just like you say in your letters to me.

Section Five

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Uma was painfully aware that soon she will be made to take over her Mama's duties and dreaded it. It would be nice to be paid for the work and to be given tools. And as for throwing odd scraps of food degradingly at our feet now and then like we are dogs, aren't we already humiliated enough, she sighed, much like the country's other hundreds of thousands of invisible manual scavengers do each day.

While she fretted, Soli pedalled furiously the full three miles to the town as he was already late for work, though he hoped no one would notice for once. After all, it was his wedding day and hopefully, if he was missed he will not be beaten too hard and will make it home to his beloved Uma.

Soli's Dalit job was to sweep the roads clear of dust which in the Indian towns and cities was a mind-numbing stupid task. But at least it's not as bad as manual scavenging, he reasoned as he picked up his broom and I also get to work with Papa and Mama.

As he began sweeping, the dust as it does all day and night descended from every direction. Nothing could stop or clear it. Especially twig brooms and even more especially when there was no way to collect the dust effectively and nowhere to dump it afterwards far enough away to stop it blowing back onto the road.

"What a silly foolish idea this is," he moaned as he swept. But the Caste deem it my job and the broom my tool and so there it is. But that does not stop it from being an ill-thought-out idea, he decided as he set about

sweeping, but not the pathways mind, out towards the middle of the busy road into traffic that could not care less about him!

Just like Uma, he is clever, though unlike her he made it through school because two of his brothers and a handful of cousins attended with him. Where he did well. He had the mind and abilities of an engineer and the brilliant analytic skills of a scientist. But sweeping dust off roads was his job. But what a waste and while he swept he pondered India's blind and greedy stupidity.

The society he slaved under could be improved so much and he was bursting with ideas. But it angered him to know that he had the ability and the will to help, but he was considered unworthy, unclean and untouchable by some and so any suggestions he had to make to improve things would be ignored. He was not even allowed to take up another job. It was sweep the roads as ordered or starve or worse.

He had laughed freely when Uma told him some of Sami's outrageous ideas, but at the same time, he had agreed. These jobs we do are not about performing a useful task, they are about belittling a race and just like Sami had, he found himself wondering what sort of mentality drives these invaders to need to continue beating a race of people who essentially were physically beaten 5000 years ago.

But then according to Sami, the invaders never managed to cower the minds of those who one day were to be called The Dalit. Maybe that is what this slavery is all about, Soli decided. The invaders are still trying to break our will. The idea of that madness is the only logical analytical conclusion that any sane person can ever arrive at.

Soli did make it home that night, but not before enduring a bout of jostling and a tirade of insults from the bosses to remind him who he was and warn

him severely against being late again.

## Section Six

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Several days later it was Uma's turn to become a slave to the wretched regime as Sami called it. "It is a regime" he stated sternly. "It is not a religion nor is it a mutual society - It is a regime with aims to profit in any way it can from the people."

Those thoughts accompanied Uma, Mama's little flower, who had barely grown out of her first shiny pot, while she was rudely being ordered to take over Mama's latrine cleaning job. It was not a surprise, she and now her beloved Soli, knew it was coming and they were prepared.

The Caste's humiliating and thunderously delivered words resounded around her, and threatened to destroy her and her family if she refused or disobeyed, she stood erect, smiling sweetly while her mind drifted off until it came to rest on her Mama's grave. Where she grinned inwardly as she thought, at least I've been able to bury my Mama and marry Soli before they tried to crush me.

Breathing calmly through their ridiculous aggression she vowed, Sami, I promised you then, as I promise you now, they won't beat my spirit, not while I'm breathing.

The next day, together, Soli and Uma rode their bikes off to work. His was his usual spick and span well-oiled man's bike, while Uma's was different in several ways.

Hers had a wicker basket on the front and a pair of home-made panniers

hanging over the rear mudguard. The bike rattled a bit as she bumped along the dirt road while occasionally crunching annoyingly when the pedal caught the loose chain guard, but she didn't care about that. It was a pair of wheels, her first in fact and she loved it even more because it had been a gift from Soli and his parents.

"We'll soon sort that noise out" Soli shouted gleefully while leaning into his handlebars to race her. "Come on slow coach," he threw out teasingly as he zoomed ahead, "or you won't get there till tomorrow."

"Show off," she laughed as she set off after him and to his surprise with her strong but slim legs working hell for leather just like the pistons on a steam engine, she hurtled past him as she took advantage of a long downhill straight. "Now who's slow," she mocked. "It's your turn to catch me if you can."

She made it to the crossroads a few seconds before he did where she laid her bike down in the long grass and flopped beside it. "Join me," she said fluttering her eyelashes seductively. "Or you can race ahead like a demon. It's your choice."

"No competition," he laughed falling in beside her. They had set off early and they had a little for themselves, so why not spend it here, he thought as he pulled her into his arms. They spent a pleasing thirty minutes fooling around, though not shamelessly, but like the love-struck children they were. Adult pleasures were still embarrassingly new to them both. Instead, they were happy to take little steps in that direction. What mattered is they had each other, as for the rest, well..., that will follow in due course.

Flustered and exhilarated she raced off first but Soli soon caught her and their childish but joyous rivalry continued. Cycling along beside Soli with the breeze licking her bare legs and a dress lifting disgracefully and flowing like

streamers behind her completed her happiness and she tried hard not to ponder too much on the coming ordeal.

She knew what to expect. She had accompanied her Mama to work often enough, especially whenever she caught a disease and was weak to work on her own. Her main fear now was making sure Soli was kept clear of any latrine bugs and viruses. If she can work that miracle then there was hope for their children to come.

Section Seven

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**H**aving lost two sisters she never knew to those diseases Mama had passed on, as well as her darling elder sister to that horrible rape and hanging and then there was her father, her poor father, although she didn't know him, taken by latrine sickness as they called it, she was absolutely determined not to inflict that on her beloved Soli.

She had written to Rachael about her future job where her returning letter sternly advised, plenty of hands and face washing using strong soap and wear a face mask always, that's a must and keep any muck well away from your mouth. That means, she had underlined while adding many exclamation marks, don't scratch your face or wipe your mouth, or itch your nose, not even once, until you have washed your hands thoroughly. Keep the muck out of your eyes too, she added as an afterthought. Which made Uma smile because that is what she taught the children. Just to make her point she also sent Uma articles about viruses and bacteria. It was incidentally the letter which had turned Uma's concern with germs into an evangelistic movement. Especially now that she had a wad of facts instead of her ideas to wave at people.

Uma and Soli took Rachael's advice to heart, though neither was sure how the authorities who managed the latrine might react to her precautions or the households she was forced to clear as well - she just prayed they would accept them.

Decked out in her home-made face mask, with her head protected by an old shower cap someone gave Soli, plus a pair of Soli's brother's old bashed-up

safety glasses and with plastic bags tied around her feet and ankles and wielding the simple, but effective shovel Soli had made for her, she received many strange looks and some ignorant and nasty comments too. But the outfit made her feel safe so she didn't care.

Plus, she also had a large hunk of bread stored in the pannier which one of the households had thrown at her because she made them laugh so much. It was a bit stale but she was keen to get home and try Mama's trick to breathe new life into it. And we'll have time for each other too as I won't have to pound grain and there isn't much of that left anyway, she reasoned as she and Soli biked slowly home.

"But I must have looked odd though" Uma suddenly said as they approached their crossroad. "And we will have to rethink the plastic bags too, Soli. In some channels the poo was deep, I slipped once and the waste came up to the top of them" she moaned "and they holed quickly. And I vomited too," she added shamefully. "But at least I managed to hoist my dress up like Mama used to do, so I only had to rinse my legs off. And there was just enough water in that bottle you thoughtfully packed for me."

"OK, we'll think about it all," Soli shouted back but then instead of going straight on to home, Soli turned right at the crossroad and putting a spurt on teased, "Come on. Race you to Mama's."

"But, NO Soli," she shouted after him. "I can't visit your parents like this. I'm dirty, I smell, I am U-N-T-O-U-C-H-A-B-L-E", she sternly reminded him, "I need to wash."

"Don't be so silly," he shouted back while peddling even faster because he knew she would gamely follow.

## Section Eight

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Uma did follow.

Arriving hot, flustered and beyond breathless as well as a bit angry, in between her gasps she spluttered two new profanities she learnt that day, although she had no idea what they meant.

"So... there... my Darling Soli! She scolded after her new words hit the air, "So what do you think of those lovely names then, do they suit you, I wonder? And like a naughty child, she poked her tongue out only to wrinkle her nose as she caught an unpleasant smell.

"I stink..." she groaned softly. Then very close to tears she murmured. "I really do stink Soli."

"Only a little, my beauty," Papa chuckled as he appeared like a genie from the side of the shack.

"And you're a good fibber, Papa," she said perking up at the sight of his round cheerful face.

"As for those lovely names you just called Soli, I think they suit him very well," Papa laughed as he paused to squeeze Uma's shoulders affectionately. "But I'm surprised those words passed your young lips without bringing a blush to such a pretty face. Although on the other hand, if those words had come from the mouth of my dear wife," he joked as he nodded towards the shack, "now that would be a different thing altogether."

“It would be indeed,” the said lady of the house scolded as she came flying out to herd Uma inside. “But I would thump you as I shouted them.”

“Come, come, come,” she then called kindly as she walked over to Uma while nodding to her son to hold his new wife’s bike while she slipped off. Then in the trilling way she had about her and just to speed things along she clapped her hands together and chased behind Uma to round her up like a restless chick. “Come, come, come, my princess” she rattled off. “Your water awaits you. And the men can stay out here and gossip until you are clean. And let’s be honest about that, they’re not fit for anything else, are they” she suggested mockingly.

Giggling at her Mother-in-law’s kindly bossiness, Uma allowed herself to be dragged around to a small recess by the cooking fire that served as a washing area for body and clothes and pots. “Strip off child and be quick, quick, quick, then we’ll see about getting you some clean clothes.”

Then she paused just long enough to take a much-needed breath where she watched Uma disrobe, only to start off again with a note of concern. “My Dear God” she uttered “Where is your meat girl. There’s nothing of you. We’ll have to sort that out too, won’t we. Oh yes we will and there’s a bucket of warm water for you to wash in,” she said while pointing to it unnecessarily. “And that is soap next to it” which was just as obvious, making Uma chuckle again.

“Oh, how I’m coming to love your Ma already, but she does leave me giddy sometimes with all her good-natured rushing around,” she confessed to Soli just after they married. Who laughed back, “You’ve only had it for a few weeks... I’ve had to put up with it for years.” Whereas quick as a flea, Uma bounced back, “But look how well it’s done for you, my strong handsome husband.” Who, even while Uma was washing under Ma’s critical gaze, she thought about dreamily.

Section Nine

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"Call me when you're done" Ma's sharp prattling cut into Uma's dreamy thoughts.

"I have a fresh dress waiting for you to wear, it's second or third-hand, maybe fourth, but never mind that it's still good. I collected it from the charity people who came today. There are a couple more here for you somewhere too, and..." she said knowing this would cheer her daughter-in-law. "From the bottom of one charity box, I scavenged you a pair of rubber boots as well. They were a find I must say. I haven't seen the likes of them for years and I believe they will serve you well. There is a slight hole in a toe, but Papa might well have fixed that by now, I did ask him, but who knows with that lazy man? They are a little large too so with your dainty feet you will have to put screwed-up paper inside, but now my dear hurry, hurry, hurry" she trilled with hardly a pause for breath.

Uma chuckled as she soaped, unsure if the hurry, hurry, hurry, was aimed at her or the contents of the pan Ma was now busily bashing loudly about nearby. With Soli's Ma, it was sometimes hard to know what she meant, or just who she was addressing, or what she was on about, as the words just gushed out of her like water from a broken tap.

Dinner was to prove just as lively and disorientating.

"I still don't know what to think about how you forced my son to marry you and then have him go off to live with you instead of you moving in here as you should and you not knowing how to cook and being so young." Ma

prattled away, but not sternly. “And I bet you’ve only just got your periods haven’t you and what about children,” she rattled on. “And when will I be a grandmother, and oh my there is so much we need to think about, rice dear...” she asked casually while plonking a spoonful onto Uma’s plate regardless. “And we haven’t even decided what to call you or you me... are you my daughter, am I your Mama?”

Something she then read in Uma’s expression made her suddenly blush and pause.

## Section Ten

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Putting down the dish she was holding Ma rushed flapping over to her son's young bride and hugged her hard and dear. "Oh, I'm so sorry, that was thoughtless of me, I'm not your Mama, please forgive me. I didn't mean you should forget your true Mama, my dear, oh my! No no, no, no, no, no, no...! Not at all!" She flapped and flustered. "But we do need titles don't we, else we'll all get mixed up over who is who and more importantly" she laughed, "who we are gossiping about and we can't have that now can we? Some fish dear...?" She asked while tipping a spoonful onto Uma's plate before marching off to see what else she may have forgotten to fetch in.

Immediately, more pans and who knows what else were soundly bashed about while a steady stream of disjointed words sent scoldingly to herself for having said the wrong thing accompanied every crash, bang and chastising wallop.

To Uma's joy and giddiness, the whole evening was spent in warm non-stop well-intended prattling or was it rattling conversation, where partway through Uma realised why Soli's father spent so much time standing outside with bits of paper jammed in his ears.

When the time came to leave Uma was quite heady as they piled outside clutching parcels of clothes, packets of titbits and a wonderful pair of pink rubber boots, where the hole in the toe had been fixed as promised.

Just as they were packing things away Soli's Mama rushed over and hugged Uma again. "You can call me Ma," she said kissing her cheek before rushing

indoors only to dash straight back out again to say, “Hurry, hurry, hurry and be off with you, the sun is setting and you have no lights.” Then despite her obvious heaviness, she skipped lightly back to kiss her new daughter again. “You’ll do alright,” she chuckled as Uma returned her kiss. “Trust me. I know you will,” before trotting back inside.

“Quick, quick, quick,” Soli laughed, “let’s go, go, go.”

“OK, OK, OK” Uma mimicked in return with laughter as she finished squashing the packages inside her panniers. Then to prove her point she smoothly mounted her bike and waving and shouting promises to return soon, she set off with Soli in hot pursuit.

“Well!” Uma chuckled as they cycled the last leg of the journey home side by side sedately like an old married couple strolling in the night’s cooling air.

“That was an ear-tingling evening, but I loved every minute of it.”

“You know my Mama is besotted with you, don’t you? She never asks to see my brother’s wives, ever. But she begged me to bring you over.”

“And why not!” Uma chirped with a smile. “Who can resist a charming DIL like me? Besides, she likes me because when she says quick, quick, quick, I hurry, hurry, hurry.”

“Yeah,” he laughed, “but what’s a DIL?”

“Daughter-in-law silly,” she threw out as she dug into her reserves, where pedalling like crazy she thundered off to beat him home by a full 6 seconds.

The sun came up again far too quickly the next morning and Uma’s sore limbs had trouble turning the pedals. “Slow is the order for today I think,” she said as they set off, “and I need to call into the headman’s house on the

way back too as I'm expecting a letter from Rachael.

It did not come that day, but a few weeks later. Although its eventual arrival would mark the start of some wonderful new things... but not before another life-changing moment was to occur to Uma...

Chapter Eleven

Uma Fights Back

(Or What Goes Around, Comes Around)

Section One

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**I**t might be recalled somewhere near the beginning of Uma's tale she was walking as a fifteen-year-old through the town. Her bike had been vandalised by Caste in an attempt to punish her daring efforts to break out of the mould by doing her horrible work her way, by using the bike and proper tools as well as wearing protection.

Having finished in the latrine she was just setting off to clear the waste from the houses on her round in both a happy and vexed mood. Her path was going to take her past her beloved Soli and his shy smile and discreet little wave that always calmed her spirit. But she was also distressed by the vandalism of her bike which had occurred the day before. What else might happen to her?

Suddenly, just a few steps on a group of men quickly approached her while shouting insults. When she dodged by them they followed closely behind to taunt her. Needled by the loss of her bike and the pettiness of those responsible for the vandalism she refused to be cowered by their ugly words and aggression. Defiantly, she walked on with a proudly raised head.

Sensing trouble in the wind a vulturous crowd began to gather and the men's aggression escalated. Their voices rose louder while their insults turned more virulent. But to their profound shock Uma instead of running away or crying turned around and shouted back at them, "What do you want with this Dalit? Tell me!" She demanded in a firm clear voice.

Horrified, Soli watched from up the road as a crowd began to form and close in around her, but Uma nodded her head just slightly, enough to warn him to

stay back. This was her fight, hers alone and she was determined to see it through.

One of the men stepped up and slapped her hard while screaming insanely into her face, “You Dalit whore! You bitch! Who do you think you are! Who said you can answer back! I am Caste, don’t you know!”

Stumbling slightly under the impact, Uma quickly gathered herself and held her ground to stare at him defiantly. He slapped her again, but she neither cried nor yelled, nor did she nurse her cheek. Instead, she simply stared at him with hatred blazing from her eyes, instead of her usual love, which angered her all the more.

Another man grabbed her from behind and held her while his friend ripped off her top in an attempt to humiliate by exposing her breasts for all to see. He had expected the slave to break down and beg him not to, but again Uma refused to cower. Or attempt to cover herself up. She just stood there, erect and proud while staring her attackers down.

“Well!” One man demanded. “Aren’t you going to cover yourself up! Woman! Have you no shame?” But when she failed to move he spat into her face and sneered, “That’s just like a Dalit whore, isn’t it!”

Uma had heard enough. “Really!” She snapped coldly and instantly the crowd hushed in apoplectic astonishment - how dare she answer back! Collective breaths were drawn and held as they wondered what was going to happen next.

Uma spoke again.

“Why should I hurry to cover up? You stripped me! You wanted a look. As for shame, I did not do this, you did. So this is your shame. And if you have

seen enough maybe you might care to help me dress!”

Like a threatened puffer fish, the crowd swelled and the anticipation of her beating rolled up and down the ranks like the waves of an aggrieved sea. Some wondered why the Dalit whore was still standing. Others bustled into the crowd for a gratuitous look at her breasts. A few others gawped, shocked that a Dalit slave, an untouchable, dare behave in such a shameful way. While most waited for the inevitable thrashing which they felt was thoroughly deserved. Quietly, a few women were willing Uma on. And although their support was silent, Uma was quickly earning their admiration and begrudged respect. Not only was she standing up for the Dalits, she was also standing up for all abused women.

## Section Two

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Those who silently supported her were coming to believe that men were using the shame of sex to hurt women far too often. Where more recently it was not happening to just Dalit women and children. The contagion was spreading nationally and it knew not Caste or the non-caste. Evil does what evil has a mind to do, regardless.

From out of the silent twitters a noticeable crack began to appear in the crowd's loyalties.

Bravely, and again to the collective shock of many of the men, silently, a couple of young women pushed their way through the crowd and stepped towards Uma to stand with her. But not too close mind, but close enough to signify their support. Seconds later two more women detached themselves from the crowd to stand with the others. Soon, there were a dozen women of mixed generations and backgrounds standing close to Uma, all in silence and all in support of her stance. And there were signs that more were pushing their way through the crowd to join them.

Uma was not safe though.

The women would not stop the men should they decide to beat the Dalit whore as the men thought of her, or do worse to her, but the women's presence seemed to say that if the Dalit was to report the incident they would back her accusation. Which was a very rare thing. A handful of the women were obviously of a superior caste which meant that their presence was enough to suggest the men should seriously reconsider their actions. In a case

such as this, the upper caste make good witnesses.

The anticipatory hum of the crowd was just about to erupt into a scream when suddenly a rapidly shrilled, “Come, come, come” refocused all their attention.

Soli’s Mama, Uma’s new Ma had seen and heard enough. She had thrown down her broom in anger and was charging forward like a destroyer at full speed determinedly towards her newly hatched chick on a rescue mission. The crowd parted quickly, fearful of coming too close to an unstoppable untouchable. Sometimes that awful curse has its uses.

The men took one look at the large Dalit woman with black thunder set grimly upon her stern face and immediately dived into the crowd where they quickly disappear.

Ignoring the irrelevant crabs as Ma thought them as they scuttled away she bore down on Uma like a loosened torpedo powered by her rapidly clucked, “Dress, dress, dress my child, they’ve seen enough.”

“Come, come, come” she then trilled while clapping her hands sharply together as she marched around Uma in a formidable fashion to stave off any who might be bold enough to start on her Uma again while she dressed. Where noticeably not one Caste male dare move or speak against her.

Just then the police arrived and an officer stepped up with the intent of arresting Uma for causing public disorder, but one of the women who had shown their solidarity beckoned the officer over and explained the circumstances.

Uma was duly ticked off and for the benefit of the crowd’s unrest she was warned, but nothing more was done, however, noticeably the men were not

sought.

Without a doubt, an event of note was written in the dust of the roadside that day. And someone else had thought so too. The story was discreetly slipped into a national newspaper before the editor realised the importance of it. Too late to be withdrawn the story passed on to the worldwide electronic network where it hit the world's press.

Unintentionally, Uma had just taken the first true step to widen that pencil mark in the Caste wall. Somehow, quickly, the story made its way into an American newspaper and was brought to the attention of Rachael, her pen-friend, who recognised the town's name. For once the reporter had conveyed a faithful description of the victim beneath a censored photo where her heart just knew it was her friend Uma. Not only did she have her first picture of Uma (at last!), be it a slightly out-of-focus side view, she also had a phone and she knew how to use it well.

While international phone lines hummed to and fro, Uma's bike was repaired and put back on the road where it was not vandalised again - or certainly not while it was anywhere near the watchful gaze of Uma's new and rather formidable Ma. Where once more Uma was able to stow her basket of faeces inside her bike's front basket and peddle it across the town where she cut quite an outlandish figure in her home-made protective gear and pink Wellington boots.

All this might have the sense and sound of an ending to Uma's tale, but in reality, as Winston Churchill once cleverly suggested, this is merely the beginning of the end.

Chapter Twelve

A Short Interlude

Section One

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**T**here exists a phrase, winds of change and it will soon prove useful but first an interlude. Well, why not. Uma and Soli are still newly-weds.

Uma's justifiable defiance raised consternation amongst a fair number of the upper Caste. Many were indignant, nay, mortified and wanted to horsewhip her, but a freshening little breeze fluttered through their windows bringing with it hesitation, or more properly, a re-visitation of discrimination laws which have existed since 1929 and improved upon many times thereafter, as well as reminders about anti-scavenging laws - although none of the laws were rarely enacted. As for scavenging, no Caste would willing to take on the role where a few of the Caste elders began to worry, what if there is a riot? She also had the support of a few prominent Caste women, several of whom had joined her defiant stand.

So reluctantly, the Caste left Uma alone and mainly ignored her, although she was still vilified occasionally and spat at often, but otherwise for the time being she continued through life mostly unmolested. While beyond their province little altered but in this region, the slightest of fault lines started to become visible when behind some enlightened but closed doors Uma's stance received its rightful and proper attention. Mainly from women, but... it was a start.

And then there was Rachael.

Her next letter was simply bursting with pride which fairly shouted from every voluminous page. She jubilantly mentioned the newspaper story and

towards the end, she reminded Uma about a previous letter in which she had mentioned help was coming and suggested she be prepared for a visit from a friend based in the UK. His name is Paul she wrote and he is keen to meet you.

As usual, Rachael signed off using a salutation she borrowed from a UK comedian, Spike Milligan, 'Love Light and Peace' which she underlined several times so hard that the pressure of the pen tip made a slight hole in the paper which Uma slowly ran her finger along as if to feel her friends love.

"I rather think we might have a guest to stay soon" she announced breezily, "though where he's going to sleep I have no idea."

"How about in the pit under the table, if we put a pillow there it will be fine" Soli joked.

"And where, might I ask my dear Soli, will your tools go and my books!"

"My tools can go in your panniers, maybe?" He offered with pretend sheepishness when he knew full well that he was goading his darling snakelet. Where his effort worked well. Her fangs shot out and she reared to her full height which at a stretch still only reached his shoulders.

"No Chance! I'm not having those things rattling around when I ride along and while I think of it Soli, maybe you can put those oily things to use and fix my chain guard. The pedal still catches on it you know... Are you listening?" She scolded.

Soli smiled with the gentle content of a man in love as his little brazen hussy threw out her tirade with almost the same breathy quickness as his Mama was famed for. Unlike his Mama though, immediately afterwards Uma rose on tiptoe and threw her arms around his neck while pulling his head down for a

kiss. Married bliss was wonderfully restored for another evening. Not that it was ever in the slightest danger of being anything else for this pair, but he loved these moments dearly. As did Uma. But he rather disliked the medical she subjects him to each night when they returned home and before she set out to teach.

“Come come come” she has taken to trilling in loving tease as soon as they enter the shack. “Let me check your temperature.” Only then for Uma to spin him around while searching for spots and rashes. Finally, his hair is lovingly mussed as she checks for lice. “Just in case Soli.” She explains. “For you never know and they carry diseases too” she nags, while fussily pulling and pushing his reluctant head about. And only when she is satisfied that he is OK for another day and not ailing in any way will their evening properly begin. And heaven forbid if I ever catch a cold, he sometimes thinks.

Soli did not dislike the process, in many ways, it was loving and cute and he understood her worry and why she put him through the examination. But at least it gives him a good opportunity to hold her slender waist and soak up some of her delicious warmth before she shoots out to teach. And then there is always the long kiss and hug when she returns home afterwards to look forward to...

# **Chapter Thirteen**

## **Uma, The Final But First Leg**

# Section One

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A pent up bitten-back much-felt phew played on the tense lips of a slightly agitated middle-aged passenger as the rocky flight of a shaky aeroplane landed with a series of horrible bumps on a runway of a small airport sat in rolling scrubland shrivelled brown by the relentless scorching sun.

Thankful that the flight was over and he had arrived in one piece and was fully able to unbuckle the seat belt unaided this longish blond-haired man of comfortable weight and above average height, but of little consequence to both his fellow passengers or occasionally his sense of self, unfolded from the cramped seat. As unseasoned as this traveller was he had enough nous to know that now was the time to be exertive. Stepping into the aisle he wrestled with the cranky overhead luggage compartment and retrieved a small carry-on bag. Then turning to apologise to the queue building impatiently behind him he joined the line of bodies fighting to leave the plane.

Having endured a long-haul flight from the UK and then that nerve-wracking internal transfer into the heart of India he was fully prepared for the awaiting heat, or so he believed. Only for that comforting idea to evaporate the instant he stepped onto the plane's ramp and into hell's breath. Careful not to touch the ramps metal handrail, or hot grill as he thought it, he descended quickly and as his feet touched the baking hot terra firma he kicked off and hastily crossed the broiling tarmac lest it seared the soles of his light British foreign-made shoes. Almost diving through the doors into the airport he welcomed the kiss of the comforting but sluggish although surprisingly efficient air-conditioning fans that were dominating the ceiling of the tiny and very

crowded airport building. Not one to admire the ascetics of the colonial, Hindu and Muslim influenced architecture his apparent attention had more to do with following signs and getting out and on with his journey, as he still had a way to go.

Finally making it through passport control he joined the jostle of people collecting bags. Then another bit of jostling saw him buy several bottles of water before joining a shorter and more quickly dissolving queue into the wash-room, where he grabbed a sink and freshened up using the safe, he hoped, bottled water... you've got to be careful Paul his worries alerted, you have important things to do...

Feeling fresher he decided, now is the time to brave the heat. Shouldering the holdall and hefting his small case he headed off to the car hire kiosk which thankfully was only a short walk away, but it still made him sweat. The car, along with the route he will take through India was planned by Ann his wife and partner in the organisation which they run to rescue abused children and women. He trusted her judgement as she was the seasoned traveller while he was usually the desk-bound lackey. But not this time and he was extremely nervous and in many ways, was innocent of all things foreign.

The car hire clerk was way ahead of Paul. Looking him up and down as if deciding which of their cars will suit this foreigner best, or more realistically, suit the clerk best, he went off to shuffle a few keys about. After a moment or so and checking out his customer once again as if confirming his choice he selected a package of documents which he placed in front of Paul, along with the key. "The car's a bit battered, but it's reliable. And it's been serviced and the tank's full," the clerk assured Paul with a toothy smile and quick little nods as he processed the transaction with the speed of someone preparing to do a runner straight afterwards.

The clerk was right, it's battered, Paul thought as he looked the car over. But

then noticing the sizeable boot he was happier. It'll do for what I need.

It was also a boring dusty grey colour and of indiscriminate age, with a good few miles on the clock, which Paul spotted as he climbed in. But thankfully the seats were an accommodating leather and overall it was very clean. And praise be, it started... Well just, and although the clutch was dodgy it somehow managed to move forward. There was to be a bit of tricky manoeuvring with the gears, clutch and the traffic as he left the airport and a moment of indecision, left or right, but thankfully, Ann had pre-empted that moment. After a glance at her map, he turned right where the car's speed once it emerged onto a sparsely trafficked carriageway picked up nicely.

After a long but uneventful journey, other than Paul's constant worry about becoming lost and using all the fuel up, or breaking down and being left stranded in the middle of nowhere and having to phone Ann in the UK to locate someone here to come and rescue him, he spotted the signs pointing the way to the town which Ann, via her map had circled in red. Knowing her Paul's inability to follow written instructions she had also underlined it several times, and he could almost hear her saying, Paul, this is the nearest one to Uma's village. Don't miss the turn-off.

Thanks, Ann, he smiled as he headed innocently towards the junction, grateful that this leg was coming to an end.

Just the provisions to collect together then it's off to Uma's village, he thought happily.

Except he was not heading for a UK town where everything is predictably laid out in air-conditioned shopping centres or supermarkets with parking available.

This was rural India where Western expectations are not considered at all.

Section Two

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**S**uddenly, as Paul started along the local approach road swarms of frenetic traffic charged out of the simmering heat haze and headed towards him.

He had seen the fields from the main carriageway, but not the red dirt tracks which dissected them. They were the local byways. The carriage way was for those living in a different world.

His arrival must have coincided with a special event, or so he thought. The number of vehicles travelling the by-ways raised the dust and through it they came to descend on Paul's car, consuming it in seconds.

As he turned a bend there were even more vehicles up ahead. He was trapped in a chaotic cavalcade which contained just about every known model of old Western vehicle or Japanese motorbike. All in various states of decay or repair or dangerously over-laden. Then there were the slower sauntering lines of bullock carts, weaving bikes and suicidal trikes. He had unwittingly become a part of an invasion force and was fighting alongside it to gain entrance into the town.

Only to be staggered once the cavalcade spread out and he was able to see what lay beyond the traffic. Never has he witnessed so many people squeezed into one place before.

There were no new buildings in evidence. They all appeared to be the fading unkempt remnants of colonialism. People emerged from every doorway,

filled balconies and packed the side-walks. They were simply everywhere, all dressed in muted shades of natural linen through to light browns and greys and onto bright rainbow colours while seething like leaking water to flow inexhaustibly and purposely in every direction. He instantly likened the swirling masses to the dance of twenty thousand reluctant brides and their attendees, with some fleeing onto the road before unexpectedly breaking rank to take their chance with the uncaring traffic. All it needed were the ceremonial elephants...

Then there were the lines of street food vendors and hungry children gathering about them like little birds ready to swoop down on dropped morsels. It was a frightening mayhem of spirits - these people were like forest fruits he thought, in various stages of ripeness struggling to leave their physical selves just before falling prey to the ravishing onslaught of swarming locusts. Where looking beyond the masses he sensed a heavy sense of desperation and depression laying everywhere and touching everything. This was survival amongst ruins with no will or means to move forward. But overall, it was the noise and confusion of smells that got to him the most. Grateful for the car's almost working air-conditioning he closed the window which thankfully muted it all while he drove around hunting for suitable places to buy provisions. But where to go, where to park? What a confusion!

He was so absorbed with those thoughts that he failed to note he was heading away from the centre. Taking a turning which looked promising he suddenly found himself in what can only be considered a shanty town. It consisted of long lines of small boxy container-like homes built from whatever was laying around at the time and stacked precariously on top of each other, in places four high and all connected by little flimsy make-shift runways and ladders which put him in mind of a child's mouse colony, except it was crawling with people. Again they were everywhere.

The whole area lay thick with the remnants of abandoned domesticity and

litter. His instincts suggested it had blown in from a huge rubbish dump that arose almost in the heart of the shanty town. And the heaps appeared to be alive. Only to realise that the movements which had caught his eye were children swarming over the massive piles as they picked their way through another civilisation's leavings, searching, he guessed, for anything that might be edible or tradeable.

“How on earth can this be one of the world's richest economies,” he sighed. “How?” Only to spit contemptuously, “This is how! Starve millions of people and pay them little or nothing and give them nothing back except for rights that they will never be allowed to use...”

## Section Three

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The magnitude of the unrestrained poverty instantly corroded his adventure's sheen and his heart went out to those hundreds of children he was passing by. And passing through too. They dashed about the road as if cars were a rarity. Slowing down for fear of running a child over he caught a glimpse of a young girl clutching a naked doll. As if sensing his glance she looked up and smiled into the car's side window. Her eyes, so big and dark and round were not appealing for help, they were full of friendly curiosity and her proud love for the doll, judging by the way she was holding onto it. Then he noticed the smiles on other children's faces and their laughter while chasing each other around in their badly fitted charity clothes or playing football. All of them totally oblivious that they were running barefoot along the inner folds of the bloated labia of a gigantic *Dionaea Carnivorus* and were heading for...

Yet still they smiled, still they played, still, they looked forward to another day... these children of poverty, of slavery, these pawns in an opportunist's society.

"No wonder they say Jesus wept..." he murmured, appalled by the idea they were born here and may well live and die without ever leaving the area. To do so will invite violence, scorn, ridicule, huge disappointment or even their deaths, he reasoned. But at least here in this aspirational-less existence, they are all equal in their subjugation. No wonder they smile, he thought, they expect nothing and what little they have is a joy, only to be caught by an idea. Their smiles rise out of the squalor and bloom like poppies laughing in the face of their area's destruction and destitution, "See this you monsters, we

might be down but we're not out. We might be poor but we are proud of each other and will remain united til that moment we embrace our shroud."

Their happiness in the face of such poverty made him wonder scornfully, what right do I, do we as privileged Westerners, ever have to feel down and miserable? Especially when much of that rubbish he thought sneeringly has probably found its way here from the UK and Europe. His rising anger at the injustice of poverty enforced on so many and how they are expected to survive rallied his flagging spirit. Sighing, "I'm here to help Uma and she deserves me at my best," he started the tricky business of navigating back to the main part of town. But not before taking several pictures with his phone and sending them to Ann along with the message, we must do something to help these children... surely someone must care enough! Surely?

Section Four

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**B**ack in the main part of town, the part tourists see, the much-needed sleeping bag, tent and gas stove took some finding. As did the rubber boots Paul expected to prove useful if he decides to accompany Uma to her place of work. Then there were the cooking pans and a kettle, mustn't forget that. Or the quinine tablets and diarrhoea treatment. Or the water purifying tablets, painkillers, insect repellents, bandages and plasters and other such things to make up a first-aid kit, plus a host of various lotions, and just in case, a book on snakes and another on insects...

As Rachael had advised, he emptied shelves of soap, disinfectant, various shampoos and conditioners, household cleaners, rubber gloves, and anything else he saw and thought Uma would need. Rachael had also instructed that as well as tinned foods and treats, don't forget to buy Uma bags of flour and plastic containers to store them in. And don't forget the can opener! After eventually finding everything he needed he then rounded up gallons of bottled water.

He spent the best part of the day shopping in scorching heat and at the end of it, he was whacked, while the car just as exhausted sat low on its suspension. It also seemed reluctant to set off, but a sudden good cough from the engine put that to right and away he went in a plume of black smoke to rejoin the melee.

Had Ann the light of his life been aware of Paul's preparations she would have shrieked with laughter and he could imagine her ribbing, 'But you had a car, Paul, you could have popped out anytime for those things.'

Maybe so, but that was not Paul's way and what if he lost his wallet?

Besides, he wanted to spend as much time with Uma as he could. As Ann had said when they first discussed the trip, or the mission, as she called it. "If Uma takes this idea on she will need to make big changes in her life which could be dangerous for her, so she will need reassurance and her courage-building, Paul," she explained. "And you are good at that sort of thing. So go there and take your time with her and stay for months if you have to. But be careful of the water," she warned with twinkling eyes knowing full well how he will react to that advice. He will worry. And that will make him happy, she grinned. As he left for the airport just to cap her advice off she shouted after him, "Remember, what's good for the locals might be bad for you."

The very last thing he did before heading off to meet Uma was stock up on lots of tea, sugar and cans of milk. And as a treat, chicken pieces for the village children, which he stowed in several cool boxes while praying they will last out the journey. After cramming the final few items in the poor put-upon car, he dug out and unzipped his holdall and without a care of creasing things searched through it looking for the mug Ann had gifted for good luck. Relieved it had survived in one piece he turned it around to read the motto 'Remember your heart's blessings', which instantly made him homesick. Stowing it safely back in the holdall he grinned, "As if I could ever forget you, Ann." Only to laugh, "Because you would never let me!"

Wreathed in that comforting thought he started up the car. Smiling at its grumblesome rattles and impolite burps he eased off the sticky clutch and pulled away from the kerb to set off on the last leg of the journey to meet with Uma.

Leaving the town behind he drove across the carriageway and on down into a dusty lane which wound through fields dotted here and there with low-growing twisted trees, some with beautiful red flowers. With the stress of the

town forgotten and lulled by the peaceful rural scene, he started positively tingling with excitement. Acknowledging a group of happy smiling children who were waving from the back of an ox cart that he was carefully overtaking he realised how much he was looking forward to helping Uma start on her own wonderful epic adventure, while sincerely praying it will not be the dangerous one he was quietly fearing it could turn into.

## Section Five

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Paul knew he was close to Uma's village but never-the-less, and purely coincidentally, he pulled up at the crossroad where Uma and Soli first met to read Ann's directions again.

Then he called Ann.

"Ann, you told me to read up on the driving rules before the flight but evidently Indian drivers don't bother with such things. In fact," he declared, "I doubt if they even know about the rules. Then there's the narrow dusty potholed roads and the countless wandering bullocks, the wedding parties, funerals and then in the towns, endless tailgating... And sure the trucks move aside if you honk them gently..." he moaned, "...only to be confronted by a laden motorbike hurtling along on the wrong side of the road. And then they shout that I'm in their way... It's manic Ann! It's a flipping nightmare..."

"But remember why you're there," she said soothingly while trying her best not to laugh. "Uma needs your help so drive carefully."

"It's not my driving I'm worried about" he quipped, "it's everybody else's!"

Happier for hearing Ann's voice he set off and arrived in Uma's village just some twenty minutes behind Uma and Soli. He did not know what to expect, or once he reached the village, what to think.

Section Six

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**A**gain, sprawling before him was more evidence of India's enforced poverty.

Some of the huts were mere 3mtre cubes created rather than built from cast-off materials and held together by nothing more than the want of luck. As for Uma and Soli, they were easy to locate, everyone knew the lovebirds and he was soon parked up by their shack which when compared to some of the others was rather grand, but it too was little more than an average garden summer house with a tiny shed at the side which he was to discover held their treasured flushing toilet and assorted bottles of marsh water used to refill the tank. Fetching the water was soon to become Paul's contribution to the household chores, but first, he had to meet them.

The sound of the engine's spluttering cough as it rattled to a shuddering halt, brought Uma's little finely boned but devastatingly pretty head poking out of the curtained doorway, where a pair of deep brown eyes full of the glow of the setting sun appraised him intelligently.

"I guess you're Paul," she said simply while stepping out to greet him wearing a smile that could have cheerfully graced every known periodical the world over he thought. "Welcome to our humble home." She said. "And no don't shake my hand, not yet Paul. I've only just finished work. I need to scrub up first."

"I've brought a few things for you" Paul said as he opened the car's rear door and began passing out to Uma and then Soli who came to help, the bottles of

disinfectant, bars of soap, shampoos, tins of milk and various canned foods and fruit, spices, rice and noodles, bags of different types of flour, he had no idea what type Uma would like, before lugging out the first of many two galleon bottles of water. “I hope you don’t mind...” Paul started to say only to find he was addressing empty air. Uma and Soli were too busy inside working out where best to store all the wonderful goodies.

As Paul lugged in a bottle of water Uma’s musical giggles erupted charmingly when he caught her sniffing the shampoo.

“I must use this,” she said eagerly, where in her excitement she nearly snatched the bottle of water from Paul’s hands and with his help, she managed to remove the seal and lid, and then tilting it she filled a saucepan and went out to place it on the cooking fire outside.

While her back was turned Soli took his chance to gather together his treasured tool kit which he quietly stashed in Uma’s panniers, but under the circumstances, he doubted she would complain. As for her treasure books, they just went wherever they could be fitted. Once Paul had finished unloading everything there was hardly any room to move in the little shack.

“I hope we have enough,” Paul said as he placed down the last bottle of water.

“Enough for what?” Soli laughed, “To float a boat?”

## Section Seven

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That evening Uma's class started a little later than usual but instead of lessons Uma and Soli built a fire and cooked up the chicken pieces Paul had brought as a gift along with bags of rice. As the pair cooked Paul happily shared it out amongst the children. For most, it was their first taste of meat unless they include the flies they might inadvertently swallow by mistake.

Uma and Soli watched their visitor with interest but what really endeared Paul to them was his opening remark to the children when they gathered to listen to this man from the UK while chewing happily on their feast.

“There is nothing worse than passing hatred down the generations”, he said and Uma smiled. Didn't she know what that was like? Then he said something which floored her, even her beloved Sami would have been bowled over she thought.

Looking pensively at the scrumptious piece of meat in his fingers which Soli had so expertly flavoured, he said, “Spices are sometimes used to mask decay, but not always in the meat, but the bile and hatred which oozes from the pores of the unjust.”

It was a little high-brow for the children, Uma considered, but the parents enticed over by the delicious smells nodded their agreement between naughty nibbles at on tiny pieces of chicken they had managed to wrestle from their children's possessive hands. “I reckon we have just munched a week's supply of chicken already” Paul whispered to Uma, “so I guess I'll be shopping again in the morning.”

Except unbeknown to them all he was to go into town a lot sooner than that.

Section Eight

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**S**uddenly, frantic blood-curdling yells of "My baby, my baby, please help, my baby's hurt" along with a child's agonized and pitiful screams filled the night air and scattered the peaceful gathering as they rushed off to seek the source.

"I think it's coming from near our shack," Uma said as she quickly ran off to investigate, leaving Soli and then Paul trailing behind. In the twilight, they almost knocked over a distraught woman struggling to cradle the child who was screeching worse than an indignant flattened cat. And it was easy to see why.

The child was covered in burns, while her right arm hung uselessly at her side and most of the skin had been seared like the chicken they had just eaten. Paul nearly vomited, but the urgency of the moment took over. "Get some of that water quickly" he ordered, "and we'll need bandages - luckily I have some in the car."

While Uma and Soli rushed into the shack to almost instantly return with a large bottle of water each Paul dug out the first aid kit he had put together only the day before. In a lighter moment, he might well have said, "One up to me Ann." But the child's injuries were far too urgent.

"Trickle the water steadily," He said, "but slowly onto her burns and let's hope it's cold enough. And be gentle. Flick it on if it's better for her Uma. And Soli, after I cut these bandages into strips soak them please."

And so they worked together to cover the child's burns the best they could. Good," Paul said as he cut up the last of the bandages, "we just have enough I think to cover her arm and chest. Now keep the water coming steadily but slowly please."

As he laid the last bandage gently on the child's arm he advised. "Ease off on the water now for a bit but remain close by with it. The bandages have to stay wet and they'll dry quickly in this heat, I'm sure, and that must not happen. But now we need more bandages for her legs and also the burn on her face and side of her head, and then she'll need a doctor urgently."

Rummaging in his bag he pulled out his favourite t-shirt and with a shrug cut a slit into it and then tore it into strips, which Soli soaked and Uma draped carefully over the remaining burns.

Slowly the girl's screams reduced into a series of wailing simpers. "Paul," Uma said dismally as they finished, "I heard what you said about the doctor but this is India and we are Dalits and no doctor will come here to tend her. It will not happen."

Paul was as stubborn in his view as Uma was upset about the injuries. "Without treatment, she will get infections and she might lose her arm or her leg. She must be treated. I, or rather my organisation, will pay for it, have no fears."

"We could try the hospital, sometimes they treat us." The girl's mother suggested hopefully.

"They will," Paul said with a certainty he did not feel. I desperately need to talk with Ann, he thought as Soli helped him clear the backseat of the tent, sleeping bag, camping equipment, his holdall and more soap and tinned goods which in haste they just let tumble to the floor.

“Lay her gently down” Paul suggested, “And there should be enough room for the child and her Mother on the backseat. And you Uma can sit up front and guide me.”

As Uma climbed into the car - her first ever - Paul asked, “Soli, could you put up my tent while we’re away?”

## Section Nine

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Before setting off they soaked the girl's bandages once again. "Hopefully that will last", he said as they pulled away. Then once up on the main road he called Ann and explained what had happened. Then passing her the name of the hospital he said, "Warn them that we are coming and please make the necessary financial arrangements. This girl must receive treatment. And tell them I will refuse to take no for an answer. Do your usual brilliant stuff please" he said before shutting off the call.

When they arrived forty very carefully driven minutes later, a trolley and a nurse were waiting outside for them. As they followed her into the back entrance she said matter-of-factly, but gently with compassion, "It is better this way, less stares and people to bother us." Uma knew exactly what she meant by that and was grateful, although she shook her head in annoyance that such subterfuge was necessary.

Alerted by a kindly but invisible person at the hospital a police officer duly arrived while the girl's wounds were being treated, where his attitude was quite nasty toward the Dalit women but noticeably respectful of Paul. Uma guessed he had drawn the short straw back at the station. With notebook in hand, he stood commandingly over them as he said harshly to the woman, "And what's your story then."

The tale when it came out shocked Paul while Uma was livid, but for the Mother's sake she held both her anger and quick tongue in check as she listened, although her white knuckles and clenched jaw gave her mood away.

“She’s only seven”, the mother cried. “Just seven! All she did was dare place her tiny tiny foot on the edge of a path claimed by the upper caste as their own, even though it isn’t. And this young Caste woman picked up my darling daughter and threw her into a workman’s brazier blazing by the roadside to let her burn for the offence. Burn!” She almost screamed before breaking down in tears. “To burn” she wailed again a moment later, but more quietly lest Caste overheard her. “And all because my child is a Dalit. Is that story enough for you Officer” she offered bitterly.

“I’m sorry” the officer muttered quietly, but before he could say but what do you expect me to do about it the woman spat as anger helped gather her wits. “But I’m sure some judge somewhere will claim she jumped into it herself and the Caste women will not be punished. And if it were not for these wonderful people how could I afford this treatment, or even enter this hospital? My child, my innocent child” she wailed as once again she broke down. Pulling herself together she said angrily, “My child would have died horribly and what did that woman say when I screamed at her! What did she say...!” She demand to know of the officer who was now so thoroughly shocked he was speechless. “Just let the brat burn, it’ll save you a lot of trouble.”

Section Ten

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**P**aul was so astonished he could not accept that the poor mite was to be severely scarred and crippled for the rest of her life simply because she made a childish mistake. But then even the word mistake annoyed him. The child's injuries were the cause of sheer barbaric hatred. And there had been no mistake, that child had every legal right to walk upon the path. He had done his research before he came and he knew that Caste discrimination was outlawed in India and has been since 1947. It should not have happened, not for any reason.

Uma was stressed and angry too, and her eyes were blazing like the remains of the fire which had crippled the poor girl. Paul could find no comforting words to offer her, he was just as angry though he calmed a little when he saw how appalled the officer was.

To their surprise the officer's attitude relaxed, he smiled and gripped the mother's hands tenderly before grabbing a chair to sit down before her. His youthful inexperience struggled to stop the anger from distorting his otherwise pleasing features. Leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees he quietly asked in a voice laden with emotion. "Do you know the woman who did this?"

Instantly Uma and the Mother relaxed too. They had so expected the normal "there is nothing we can do" response so when his question came it was almost anti-climactic.

Luckily the mother did know the assailant. She was a tempestuous woman

known for her hatred of Dalits and worked in a cafe on the main thoroughfare in the town. The officer left them, promising charges would be brought. I also think she should pay for your daughter's treatment and provide compensation. I will do everything I can to get this put right for you and your daughter.

Uma nodded her thanks but did not smile, although she was happier inside, but to show it would have been rude to the mother. But she wanted to smile because she sensed a little chip falling from the thin pencil line in the caste wall. It is coming, she thought, slowly yes, but it is on its way, I can feel it.

A little later a nurse popped her head out of a cubicle and called the woman over. Alone with Uma, Paul took the chance to explain his connection with Rachael and to show Uma a comment he copied from a newspaper article posted online which he had stored on his phone before leaving.

Their names are Alice and Clair, but more about them later. Anyway, being friends of mine and working with my wife's organisation, they told us all about you and..." She sat eagerly forward again as her mouth began once more to form a question, but again he pre-empted her lively inquisitiveness, it was clear she wanted to know everything "...we help abused children and women and we all agree, that describes your life perfectly, and that as you know is why I am here.

"Rachel told our mutual friends, two young ladies who desperately wanted to come with me to meet you, and if I can get a good signal on this phone you will see them a little later – Uma looked about ready to jump in to ask him a bundle of questions, but she then relaxed when he explained, "Online, using the phone. Their names are Alice and Clair, but more about them later. Anyway, being friends of mine and working with my wife's organisation, they told us all about you and..."

She sat eagerly forward again as her mouth began once more to form questions, but again he pre-empted her lively inquisitiveness, it was clear she wanted to know everything, "...we help abused children and women and we all agree, that describes your life perfectly, which is why I am here," he explained. I am a partner in and also help run a large but private organisation in the UK which helps out with cases of abuse. Well..., anyway, through Rachael's talks with Alice and Clare, I know your thoughts concerning the Caste wall and your wishes to see it tumble. So I thought you might like this quote from an interview I found posted online. It's to do with a rape case that was moving too slowly through your Indian courts. I'm guessing you will appreciate the comment far better than we did."

When she looked quizzically, Paul grinned. "Online means it was posted onto the internet for all to read."

With Uma still looking perplexed, Paul thought it will be easier to just show her. "It's stored on here," he explained, "on my phone, see. The article is about a slow-moving rape case brought by a Dalit girl, I guess you'll appreciate the comment far better than us."

## Section Eleven

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With trembling hands Uma took the phone, the first she has ever handled, and after a quick tutorial on how to swipe she read the message. Paul smiled as her swipes changed from little hesitant flicks to bold eager ones as she rapidly devoured the article, while her eyes grew round and shone brightly. Moments later as she came to the end her mouth slowly split into a beautiful sparkling excited smile. How could she not want to read it over again where glory be it had not changed one single wonderful word in these few moments.

“I went to see the Hisar SP Vikas Dhankar” she gleefully read. “Who also has an office in the mini-secretariat. He emphasized that they have been diligent in their investigations. And unbiased, of course. With a distressed expression, he said, “Lower caste? You should know that these lower caste people are now coming out and filing complaints against the atrocities happening to them. The situation is not like how it used to be years ago. And I tell you, wait for the next ten years. This whole caste system will get finished itself. You see, with all these inter-caste marriages happening around, how can caste survive?”

Paul when he spoke to Ann later that day, said the power and beauty of her smile at that moment could have caused islands to rise from the sea.

Uma had lost so much in her life that she loved dearly and nothing would give her more pleasure than to read the article again with her Mama stood one side of her and Sami on the other. She took a deep breath then silently she sent her love to her Mama and added, if Sami is there with you, please pass

these words onto him, and then she re-read the last four words over again, several times, and each reading blessed her heart more.

Excited beyond her wildest dreams Uma's hand shook when silently she passed the phone back to Paul. Her face beamed like a lighthouse and her heartbeat raced so far ahead it had to flutter to return to its natural rhythm. There, in black and white words from a reliable source was her and Sami's dream. It was truly happening, It was coming. Her urge to scream at the top of her voice, upper caste, hear me, it is nearing the time of your end was almost overpowering. Desperate to vent her excitement she suddenly leapt up from her seat and jumped in the air to throw an emotional victorious fist pump that would have done a match-winning footballer proud, while Paul looked on with the paternal pride of a goal scorer's parent.

Remembering where she was and why they were there she took a deep breath, then another and repeated the words in her mind, calm down Uma, calm down Uma, you're in a Caste hospital. Clenching her tiny fists, although not in aggression but to help her concentrate she sat down again where her smile rushed off to reach her eyes which sparkled with gladden tears. Then in case the Mother came back out and caught her smiling she puckered her lips in an attempt to look stern. At the same time, she tried so hard not to look at Paul while he did his very best not to laugh when her fingers gripped the edge of the chair while her face, for a few seconds, took on the fixed blank expression of a finishing school student. She sat perfectly rigid, with a straight back and knees and feet together as if hoping to win a gold star in respectability. For the rarest of moments, not a single muscle twitched, not even the one in her neck which Soli claimed was her tell whenever they played cards. Then silently her lips began to move as she worded a quick prayer to God, her Mama and of course to Sami.

Struggle over, composed but with a face aglow with joy and tears dancing in her eyes she spun around in her seat to face Paul who was trying desperately

not to laugh at her. Ignoring his silent teasing and with obvious euphoria she asked, “Paul, can I read that again please...”

Chapter Fourteen

Uma, The Final But Second Leg

Section One

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**P**aul stayed with Uma and Soli for a just over month where he happily became embroiled in village life. To his joy he, managed to have the common pasture reopened to the Dalit villagers which for years had been denied them. The upper caste fought his attempts but the police had no choice, they had to act, as Ann on his behalf had lodged an official complaint through political channels and it had been agreed that the pasture must be reopened. Ann had done her homework well and he sent her his heartfelt thanks.

He also freed the villages well from the Castes hands. “Fight me on this,” he had threatened, “and I will see you jailed.”

As the weeks passed, Paul Uma and Soli discussed many caste related issues. Paul even accompanied Uma in her work a few times, where frankly, he was appalled. There was no excuse for this torture he thought and he agreed with he that that is exactly what it was, unmitigated torture.

Ann dug some articles or him which cited comments made by Indian officials talking to W.H.O concerning the whole issue of scavenging which had outlawed as unlawful. Not only was the attitudes of the Indian delegation disgusting, most of what they said was blatant lies.

For starters they stated ‘*categorically*’ to W.H.O, ‘there are less than 10,000 scavengers working across India’ – working used cynically to imply that the scavengers were paid. Everyone knew there was more than that number working in and around the main towns in Uma’s region which in itself is just

a tiny portion of the huge continent.

They also told W.H.O that the open dry latrines, the unhygienic type Uma worked in, were a thing of the past. Another lie. At the time of the statement they had not replaced one of them, though apparently grants had been taken from various world organisations to build flushing latrines.

As far as Ann in the UK was concerned as she relayed information to Paul and Uma, the real bone of contention which she had found and was keen to see highlighted on the world stage, was when the Indian contingents at a W.H.O conference publicly stated that, 'in their regions there were NO scavengers, yet, the head of the contingent and his staff had back home the use of eighteen scavengers. Again, they used the term 'no longer working for us', to imply they had received pay.

Scavengers historically do not receive pay other than crusts of bread now and then, maybe a small bag of grain once a year and at festival time they might, they might... receive a gift of odds and ends of second hand clothing. But money? It is doubtful that through their work, any scavenger ever saw money of any worth.

As Paul walked with Uma through the town he could feel the hatred focused on both him and Uma. This, he thought, is how victims of severe racism must feel every time they go out onto the street. It was the worst form of hatred he had ever experienced. But what was really vexing and sickening to his UK mind, was that if he were to pick Uma up and drop her into another town and put decent shoes on her feet and reasonable clothing, nothing about her would indicate she was not of caste. Nothing at all, yet here in this town they hated her enough to want to kill her.

Walking beside this jewel of India as he called her, he did not care one hoot what the upper caste thought about him. As far as he was concerned if he was

going to help Uma he had to understand some of her life, and if possible the castes mind set, because that is truly where Uma's abuse issues.

He also arranged for Ethan, one of the technically brilliant lads from his organisation to fly over and help Soli set up simple wind generators so they can run a deep freezer or two. He read somewhere they were doing that in Africa. "If they can do that there, then why not here too," he said to Ann one night as they talked. "They might even generate enough power to charge the laptops and phones I want to gift them with as well, otherwise they will be pointless Ann."

Paul and Soli talked about solar panels as well. "We'll be happy to fund that experiment," Paul said, "and if they work they will answer quite a few of your needs and it's not as if you have a shortage of sun" he laughed as he baked in the heat of an Indian summer.

More importantly for Uma, he explained his understanding of the laws regarding discrimination and scavenging. "You do not have to put up with the upper castes behaviour and you do not have to do manual scavenging. It is illegal for them to force you into it. I promise you this, myself and the organisation will help you fight that. But I understand the distress and the punishments that may well follow you as you struggle to break free from their tyranny, so doing so must be your decision."

He changed tact for a moment to give her chance to absorb it all.

"We will try to get the solar panels in and working within the month and a Satellite dish, then you can talk to us properly via the internet and that way we can help you directly."

Then gently moving back on track he said softly. "So please think about our offer. My opinion should you want it is, you owe it to your villager friends

and all those you will meet over the years. I believe they are waiting Uma for you to lead them into a new and better life.”

## Section Two

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Early the next morning Paul took off for a few days alone to explore the region but really it was to give Uma time and space to think things through. He wanted her to become the teacher she always dreamt of being, but there were a load of issues for her to work through.

With a free evening at last Uma and Soli set off to visit Soli's parents, they had not seen them for a while and they had lots of news.

Arriving at Ma and Papa's home Uma carefully laid her bike on the ground and strode purposely into the house while Soli hung around outside to prevent Papa from interrupting Uma and Ma.

Uma walked into the main room and thought just like she did every time, it's nice here, but I prefer our small shack it's more snug. But Ma and Papa seem to like their space, as evidenced by Papa's well-worn chair outside.

Ma as usual erupted in joy at the sight of her daughter but the look on Uma's face cut her flow of words short, though she still managed to say, "Oh bless me, come come come, sit sit sit."

Without any preamble and not knowing what to expect from Ma and full of nerves because of Soli's cowardly, "I'll let you go in and talk to Ma, while I wait out here with Pa" had given her very little encouragement. Or hope that she might be bringing joyous news into Ma's life, so Uma simply blurted out, "I think I'm with child Ma."

While Uma's heart buzzed with excitement there was also fear and she so needed Ma to be willing to help and advise her. The life of an impoverished manual scavenger surrounded daily by bacteria and viruses galore was not conducive to healthy childbirth. And the chances she might lose it were extremely high and instead of delivering good news as she hopes, this moment might well be a portent of death and painful disappointment for them all.

And Ma might not want to bear that.

Nervously, Uma looked at Ma who merely stared back at her as she silently pulled out a chair at the table and abstractly pushed a piece of bread in Uma's direction without once uttering "Come come come, sit sit sit eat eat eat."

There was not even a smile.

Then Uma saw it.

Ma was biting her lip.

But her eyes were shining.

Brilliantly.

Then a tear fell.

Which was quickly followed by another.

And a loud snuffle.

Before Uma knew it she was caught up in the hardest hug she has ever experienced. And it was a very wet one too. Ma's tears trickled down her neck in a cascade of love and strangely for Ma, muted joy.

A while later Ma sniffed loudly again before whispering. “My heart is breaking because your Mama is not here to share this joy of ours. But I promise, I’ll do everything I believe she would have done for you and more, my wonderful child with child.”

Section Three

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U ma's tears joined Ma's as she hugged her back and that is how the men found them when they looked in see why there had been no screams of joy. Or the hilarious sight of Ma rushing about in a lathered flap like the Indian President, searching pointlessly for the compassion in his heart before a joint meeting with a delegation from WHO and The UN Climate Committee...

That is not quite what Pa said to Soli. In fact, it was nothing like it.

“Got me some fermented sugar cane son,” Papa offered in a whisper. “I keep it hidden outside from you know who,” he said gazing tenderly at his larger-than-life wife. Somehow he guessed she was not going to miss him or Soli for the next hour or two. “Come on lad,” he whispered, “we’ve a jar to go dig up.”

On that joyous note, it would seem it is nearing the time to leave our Dalit lovers and their burgeoning family to make their way... but not quite yet.

That wind which had tickled and cooled her face when she was born still has a few things to blow into line.

## Section Four

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They all knew that where they and Uma go from is all down to the reaction of the officials in the region to Paul's efforts to lift Uma out from the caste's unlawful, and obscenely wicked demands and to give her the life Soli, Paul and her Mama and Sami had wanted for her, and now her new friend Sita, and of course, her new Ma and Papa. They wanted the best for Uma because it also means the best for their son and grandchild and they were sure Uma would make the right choice. As Ma remarked during a tender moment with Papa, we probably know where her heart lies better than Uma does. But we have to let her catch us up, don't we.

She had said something similar to Uma when she had explained Paul's visit to Ma and her worries. "If we have to move you to another village, then that is what we will do. We'll work it out for you Uma."

Paul's wish, as well as those who know Uma well, is, she teaches Dalit children who are unable to attend school and for her to educate and campaign against manual scavenging, as well as help foster simple home farming ideas, hygiene issues and the even bigger issues of sexual health, of abuse, women's rights, as well as putting an end to child sex slavery.

"Not a lot for a tiny flower to achieve," Soli quipped while seriously believing that his darling wife will be able to do it all with her gorgeous eyes shut.

As for Uma, her heart is desperate to try. And now that she has spent time with Paul she is confident of his organisation's support. He was already

making plans for his return, but even though she has Paul beside her and the memory of her friend and mentor Sami to guide her thoughts, plus her sorrow at her Mama's too-early and unnecessary passing, she is scared of the retribution that will come, as come it most certainly will. But not just for herself. She believes she can handle the caste. It is her new family she is scared for. The upper caste may turn on Soli and his parents and brothers and their children and out of sheer spite destroy the village she lives in now. She is painfully aware that such evil deeds have occurred before whenever Dalits have dared stand to be counted and not as a master's possession or a religion's slave.

"Maybe Ma is right," she said to Soli while they were making ready for bed, "moving might be best, somewhere where my background will be less of an issue."

"The choice is this," Uma said as Soli blew out the candle - she had been too shy to light the gas lamp Paul left them to use - "We can continue to be crushed by the caste system. Forced to remain in their servitude for no reward, to endure abuse, torments, and slow starvation. Illness may well cause me to abort our baby, or I may have to struggle with the emotions of raising a child, only to watch it fade away like Mama had to. If things stay as they are, we can look forward to a life of continuous contamination by many unpleasant life-threatening diseases, without the benefit of medical treatment. Or I can fight."

The words from a website Paul had shown previously sat heavily on her mind.

"Manual scavenging is itself a form of caste-based violence and needs to be understood that way. It is degrading, it is imposed upon very vulnerable people, and in order to leave manual scavenging, they have to make themselves even more vulnerable— they risk backlash, they don't know how

they will live.”

“If I continue as a manual scavenger I will at least be alive, our family will stand a chance of eating -occasionally. And our home will remain unmolested hopefully. And we will have a life, of sorts, though it will be limited in every way.”

She went quiet then and lay very still. She was thinking, so Soli waited patiently in the dark for her to speak her mind. He knew what he wanted to say, just as he was sure she would ask him what he thought. It was her way. She was never selfish and she always thought of him and others first. Maybe, he reasoned, it's time that changed a little.

He felt her turning towards him to place her head against his chest. When she spoke the vibrations of her words travelled through his veins and on into his brain to become a part of his memories. “What to do Soli? Do I live a dream or do I live in a harsh reality?”

“You are my dream, Uma” he declared honestly, “and I live in it every day, so why should you not live in yours.”

Chapter Fifteen

Uma, The Final Third Leg

Section One

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When Paul returned from his mind-boggling bout with Indian tourism he could feel Uma's eagerness to start her new life and also her fear of starting it. He knows he cannot decide for her, it is her decision alone, he can only offer help and advice and hopefully nudge her gently in the right direction. As he prepared to leave Paul did two things.

Firstly, he replied to a text from Rachael which read, 'I'll be boarding flight shortly. Does she know?'

"No." he typed back. "Funds telegraphed as agreed. I'll meet you at the local airport with a cranky old car...'

He had asked her to come to visit Uma and he had paid the fare, just as he will fund her stay for as long as she needs. If Uma decides to go forward as they would all like, Rachael has already indicated she would love to stay and work with her.

OK... I have the itinerary... See you in a day or so.

He typed back, 'I have left a tent and cooking equipment for you with Uma. And Yes, I will gladly tell her you are coming.'

But before Paul gave Uma the wonderful news, which he was sure it would be, he decided to show her a couple of quotes he found online, where he willed that the words might tip her heart in the right direction.

“If you decide to take the risk and leave scavenging my organisation will employ you as our representative in India”, Paul informed her as he watched her reading. She nodded she understood while her eager fingers nimbly scrolled through the text as if she has been using a phone all her life. Where her face suddenly saddened as she imagined the life of the children revealed in the first message.

*“I began cleaning dry toilets when I was 10 or 11 years old with my mother and four sisters. Then I was married and joined my mother-in-law for cleaning. I had never heard that there could be a life other than this.”*

The second one simply infuriated her. For a several beats hatred dwelt in her otherwise loving heart.

“One Dalit boy, around six or seven touched a pot on the desk of a caste child by accident when he skipped by. In front of the whole class, the teacher lifted him harshly off the ground 50 times by his ears and shook him hard. When his parents came to complain, the teacher to invite more scorn from onlookers very loudly abused their low Dalit status and continued to berate them viciously until with bowed heads they left the building. They had no right to reply, they were Dalit and the police refused to intervene. The child stopped attending the school, a victory for the upper caste for they had kept another upstart Dalit slave out of their school.”

Tears pricked her eyes. It brought back all her young expectations and sense of outrage when her dreams were snatched away. She knew exactly what Paul was trying to do. He was emotionally blackmailing her and she wanted to scold him playfully for it and say, ‘as if I’m not being used enough’, although, at the same time, she was glad for his concern. Resettling her mind she started to read the last message with trepidation, but as she took in the words instead of more anger she perked up and her beautiful smile appeared once more - it was a quote from one just like Uma and it read:

“I had no idea about the law or the campaign to leave manual scavenging. Then one and a half years ago, I learned all this and left. I work to end manual scavenging now. I speak to people, understand their problems, and then I speak to the officials and make them understand the law.”

Uma’s heart swelled with pride for the young lady behind the message. She wanted then so much to reach out and pull open the crack and help her people flee the throttling grip of the caste system. Her heart said, do it, go out into India and help, although her mind spoke otherwise to trip her steps - you may have to leave Soli and the village so they can be safe.

## Section Two

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While Uma wavered uncertainly, Paul laid his ace card and told her about Rachael. "She's coming for a long visit, and is on her way now," he said "and will be here in a day or so..."

Uma's joy and excitement were beyond anything Paul had imagined and she left him standing with a silly grin on his face as she dashed hither and dither laughing and telling anyone who would listen, even Gunter's chickens, that her friend Rachael was finally coming for a visit. Eventually, she calmed down enough to return to Paul's side to listen to the rest of his thoughts.

"While she's here she will help you research and understand better the anti-discrimination laws and how you can use them to your benefit. Then when, or if, you are ready to move forward I will return to be with you and hopefully by then I'll have found a way to bypass the ban imposed by your government on those 10,000 Dalit Charities from receiving overseas donations. Which I cannot believe your president imposed. But as people say, where there's a will there's a way - and I intend to find it."

Paul then said his goodbyes to Uma, Soli and a gaggle of well-wishers from the village, including the stray chickens before climbing into the battered but faithful old car with a heart full of hope for Uma's future. Where with a smile he realised as he started the car up, these wonderful people had worked their way into his heart and he was sorry to be going.

But laying as thickly in the air as the car's exhaust fumes was the fear that it will not be easy for Uma to change her life. It could result in her death, for a

dog rarely gives up a bone willingly, he thought. And to the Caste that is all Uma is. A bony little girl they can treat as badly as they please.

As she bent into the window to kiss his cheek he whispered to her, “Whatever path you chose you will always have my friendship and my organisation’s support.”

Then before they could both cry he pulled away happy to know that he was leaving her in good spirits.

So, there it is. Which line of fate Uma follows may well depend upon that wind of change which first kissed her hot face as a newborn baby.

“Goodbye for now Uma,” Paul whispered as he slowly drove up the lane. And hopefully, he thought as he took one last look in the rear view mirror and smiled at their happy faces, some good changes will come for that sparkling little flower who wants only to be useful and to help her people. And be respected as an Indian citizen and as a Mother and a woman and to live with her beloved Soli and her children in peace for a very long time.

Is that too much to ask, he wondered as he turned onto the main road that will take him past the town where unfettered evil roams and hopes are made to die. And children and women too.

As that breeze so loving of Uma slipped through the window to soothe his flustered skin, he whispered softly but in heartfelt sincere, “Good luck Uma”, while wiping away a tear which he shed not for her but for the sins of a country that could be so much more than its bad indoctrinations. “And I pray when I see you again you will be in full flower and ready to resow India.”

The End

If you would to read a little background on the Dalits and in particular manual scavenging try these three links which will open in a new browser window.

[Explaining Manual Scavenging](#)

[Manual scavenging deaths of Dalits](#)

[March Against Manual Scavenging](#)